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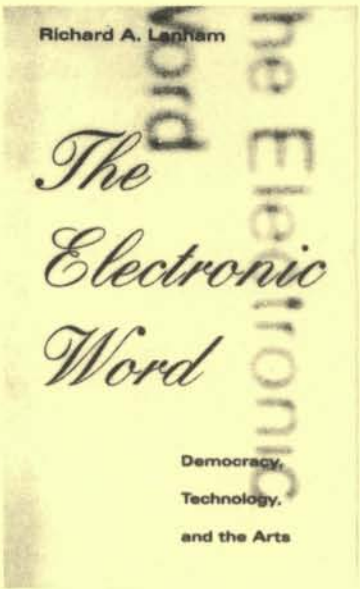


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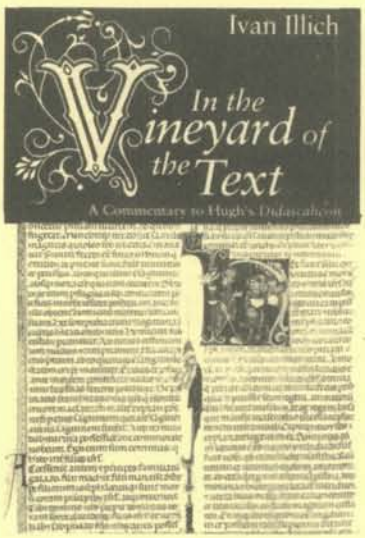


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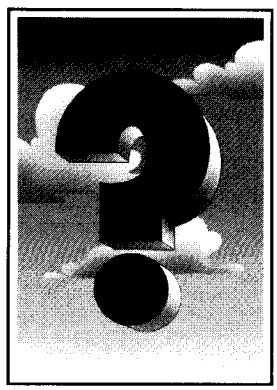

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# Nicely Out of It

ARISTIDES

I have of late been feeling comfortably, luxuriously, really quite happily out of it. In wondering how this pleasing condition has come about, it occurs to me to ask an anterior question: Was I ever truly *in* it? Or, to keep my prepositions straight, Was I ever truly *with* it? I'll get to the meaning of that "it" presently, but the "with" speaks to a happy conformity, an almost total consonance, *with* one's own time. Carried to the highest power, being with-it calls for being a conformist just a little ahead of one's time, which is, come to think of it, a short definition of a trendsetter. I cannot say that I ever achieved such an exalted station, though I have the feeling that I might have had I stayed on the job. But I abandoned with-it-ry fairly early in life and hence, for better *and* worse, dropped out as a serious conformist.

I fear an air of put-down has crept into that paragraph, when all I intended was a mild whiff of self-congratulation. Let me attempt to make amends by saying quickly that I realize conformity, or living in spiritual consonance with one's own time, is no small pleasure. I myself last felt fully with-it nearly forty years ago, a period I often think of as the most pleasant in my life.

The "it" in "with-it" refers to life, life in its full and fine vibrancy, especially life lived at the very vortex of contemporary experience. To wear the clothes, to eat the food, to hum the tunes, to think the thoughts of one's own time, all perfectly unself-consciously; to feel utterly at ease in the atmosphere in which one lives, without any complaint or fret; to be up to the moment, au courant, jollily, joyously with-it—all this is, no doubt about it, a delightful state in which to find oneself.

I was seventeen when last in this state. I thought that I knew pretty much all I needed to know about life, with only a little filling in required here and there. I picture myself as I was then, walking down the corridors of Senn High School, wearing a green and white letter sweater, Levis, white sweat socks, loafers. At my side is a girl named Jackie, with a winning smile and a generous bosom draped in softest cashmere; in the background, the city of Chicago, which seems endless in the possibilities it offers a young man of adventurous spirit; ahead of me, an unclouded and entirely promising future. That happy fellow—me—now seems as distant, really quite as historical, as the head of a youth on an Antiochian coin of the second century B.C.

What would have been the reaction of that serenely thoughtless young man had he, around that time, drawn a fortune out of his cookie that all-too-accurately prophesied: "You will soon and forever after live at a self-consciously oblique angle—skeptically, critically—to the life of your times"? "Whaddaya, kidding me?" he would likely have replied. Had I, knowing what I know now, been on the scene, I would have implored him, "Struggle against it, kid. Escape your fate. Don't, whatever you do, travel to Samarra. Forget the fortune, eat the cookie, pay your check, fight to remain pretty much as you are." But such advice probably wouldn't have mattered. Fate isn't so easily eluded.

When young I not only thought it important to be, but found no difficulty in staying, completely and cheerfully with-it. When I—not quite so young any longer—determined to become a writer, I fought manfully to stay up to the moment. By "up to the moment" I mean absolutely current in politics and popular culture. I felt under an obligation to know the key politicians as well as the popular songs; to go even to the bad movies; to listen to televi-



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sion talk shows; to glimpse most of the popular magazines, including the women's magazines of the day. All this was done with deliberation and under the banner of keeping in touch with my country and its culture, which, as a writing man, I felt it incumbent upon me to do.

As best as I can date such an event, I believe I began to feel out of it roughly in 1966. Around that time the curtain fell, dividing the country between the young and the not-young, and I found myself, even though only twenty-nine, on the not-young side of that curtain. The student revolution had begun, and I—in taste, in temperament, in point of view—had *ancien régime* so clearly written all over me that I might as well have worn a powdered wig.

The unintelligible lyrics of rock music may have been the first inkling I had that I would fall further and further out of it. I continued occasionally to listen to country-and-western music with comic pleasure, learning that, as you yourself may not be aware, "God made honky-tonk angels" as well as that, what is perhaps more obvious, "everybody's somebody's fool." But listening to hard rock seemed more on the order of a punishment, and my desire to stay generally with-it, though still real, stopped short of masochism. (Masochist to sadist: Beat me. Sadist to masochist: No.)

I hope the following confession doesn't land me a job on the U.S. Supreme Court or even, God forfend, as President, but—you may as well know this up front, Senator—I have never smoked pot, another sign of my early out-of-it-ness. I have been in rooms where people seemed moronically happy puffing on the good stuff, as they called it; and I was once at a party where everyone sat in a circle and passed around a joint, but when it got to me I felt the whole ritual vaguely preposterous—your ironic man, poor chap, tends to eschew ecstasy—and passed it along without partaking.

Although I loved the movies of my youth, I found I couldn't take the movies of the 1960s and most of those that followed all that seriously. In fact, the more ambitious the intentions of these movies, the more they seemed like comic books to me. To prove my out-of-it-ness once again, in my pantheon Pauline Kael never came close to replacing Edmund Wilson.

I don't for a moment wish to give the impression that I live unrelievedly on the highbrow level of culture. I live there with a great deal of relief. In the realm of culture, I rather admire people whose standards are more stringent than my own. I was recently talking with a friend to whom I happened to mention the name Steve McQueen. He stopped the flow of conversation to ask who Steve McQueen was. I found it striking that a man in his late fifties could live all his days in the United States without having heard of Steve McQueen. I once asked this same friend, not long after I had come to know him, if he ever went to the movies or watched much television. "I consider the movies and television," he announced, "dog droppings" (I euphemize). Not even to allow these major American forms of entertainment the dignity of horse or bull by-products seemed to me perhaps further than I wished to go, but his distancing himself from the seductions of popular culture seemed to me impressive nonetheless.

I still watch lots of sports on television and go to five or six baseball games a year. I am well known at my local video-rental store, where I often ask for assurance that the movie I am about to rent isn't all shooting and screwing. (I am usually told, rightly, that it isn't: the movie generally turns out to be only about 60 to 80 percent so.) I nowadays steer clear of all talk shows and am proud to report that a number of currently famous people are at least still unknown in my house. Nevertheless, by osmosis of a mystical kind, I know rather more than I wish I did about people with no possible relevance to my life and whose minds I find more than a jot less than fascinating. I feel I would be living a better, a more elevated life if I didn't recognize the names Burt Reynolds, Marv Albert, Madonna, Connie Chung, Willie Nelson, David Gergen, Regis Philbin, and Dan Dierdorf. But, alas, I do.

In the progressive stages of out-of-it-ness, I not long ago crossed the line from merely being mildly out of it to taking a small but genuine pride in being out of it. I'm not sure I can convey how pleased I am at never having seen an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, or the television show "L.A. Law," or Arsenio Hall, or the Whitney Museum Biennial. How regrettable that I didn't take a pass on the Robert Mapplethorpe show, the last episode of "Cheers," or Jay Leno! I suppose one can't be perfect—one can't, after all, hope to miss everything. More and more, however, I have begun to feel that it would be nice to try.



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"In fashion and in medicine," wrote Proust, "there must always be new names." So, too, as we know, in sports, in literature, and especially in all departments of show business there must be an inexorable roll of new names. I grant that. I only ask not to know most of these names. I feel I am progressing nicely when, standing in the checkout line at the supermarket, glimpsing the grocery-store press (our version of England's gutter press), I don't recognize the names of people involved in scandals, or when I haven't a clue about the person on the cover of *People*. Yet there is no gainsaying that I do know the names Dolly Parton, Loni Anderson, and Tina Turner (not to speak of Keena Turner, the former San Francisco 49ers linebacker). So many, after all, are the old names I do not know enough about: Callimachus, Hypatia, Erasmus, Palestrina. I know, I fear, altogether too much about the Barbarians and not nearly enough about the Hellenes.

The names one must nowadays know to qualify as with-it lack not only quality but much in the way of staying power. In human typology, most are a little lower than I wish to go. If names there must be, let us have names of better quality. I even have a taste, come to that, for the gentle art of name-dropping. I wish I had a talent for it as sure as that of the late Ben Sonnenberg, the public-relations man, who specialized in what his son has called "the secondary name-drop." When asked if he knew George Gershwin, for example, Sonnenberg would reply: "*Know* him? I used to play gin rummy with his mother." He also once told an interviewer: "I know the difference between Irving Berlin and Isaiah Berlin, and I know them both." I shouldn't myself at all mind being able to say that I played Ping-Pong with their fathers—and beat both badly. I should mind this a lot less than having to confess, as I now do, that I even know who Tommy Tune is.

One doesn't become out of it overnight. I happened recently to have been reminded that as long as fifteen years ago, when I was a mere slip of a youth of forty-one, I was called, by a book reviewer, "crankish" and "rearguard." This was distinctly not meant as a compliment, but, somehow, I didn't find myself taking offense. I even felt myself a touch precocious in being judged out of it so relatively young. If I lived to be eighty, there was no telling how far out of it I might eventually go; perhaps I could slip all the way back into the eighteenth century, which has always seemed to me a nice place to visit.

Apart from having a naturally conservative temperament, there are any number of reasons for falling out of it. One is that it might be part of some general personal breakdown. Staying with-it, after all, can be a terrible strain. When F. Scott Fitzgerald declared his crack-up—in *Esquire*, of all places—he was partially declaring his wish to be out of it, at least for a while. In a passage demonstrating that, even in the midst of a crack-up, he could continue to be charming, Fitzgerald wrote:

> Trying to cling to something, I liked doctors and girl children up to the age of about thirteen and well-brought-up boy children from about eight years old on. I could have peace and happiness with these few categories of people. I forgot to add that I liked old men—men over seventy, sometimes men over sixty if their faces looked seasoned. I liked Katharine Hepburn's face on the screen, no matter what was said about her pretentiousness, and Miriam Hopkins' face, and old friends if I only saw them once a year and could remember their ghosts.

Another reason for falling out of it is that you don't much like your times and wish, either gently or brusquely, to slip away from them. I have often enough felt sufficiently at odds with our times to have to consider this as an explanation for my slipping gradually out of it, though I don't, in my own case, think this the chief reason. Yet when I consider what it would take today to be considered with-it, the prospect, so pleasing to some, is to me, to put it gently, problematic. To begin with, there is the geographical problem. One cannot really be considered seriously with-it in, say, Minneapolis, or Salt Lake City, or Milwaukee, or Sacramento. One could perhaps qualify while living in San Francisco or Los Angeles; or, from a specialized standpoint (in outdoor living, in politics) in Seattle or Washington, D.C. Abroad, London, Paris, Rome, Florence continue to strike the gong as with-it cities.

But the with-it capital of America, probably of the world, is New York—more specifically, Manhattan—a fact that in itself may be enough to discourage many from the demands of a thoroughly with-it life. A great many people stand ready to put up with the punishing qual-



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ity of quotidian life in New York—crime, filth, rudeness, high prices—in exchange for the rewards of thinking themselves at the center of the action. I have known people who have left careers—in teaching, in publishing—rather than leave New York. What I believe alarmed them about the prospect was their sense that being out of New York meant, in the end, being out of it—and this, clearly, appalled. What price with-it-ry?

What, today, would a thoroughly with-it life look like? Much time, I imagine, would have to be spent at art galleries and shows looking at many doubtless extraordinary, mostly extra-aesthetic objects. Evenings would find one at a vast variety of new restaurants, tucking into all sorts of dubious delicacies. Either before or after dining one would be expected to buzz off to the Brooklyn Academy of Music for an evening of interminable avant-garde opera or to an unpleasant play on a terrifying subject Off-Off-Broadway. One would, as a man, be wearing the bulky, dark clothes of the kind I see advertised in *Gentlemen's Quarterly* or *Esquire*. One's hair would be pomaded and brushed back; a single earring as like as not would dangle from one ear. One would have to read a great deal of that journalism, companion sheets to the grocery press, that ought to go by the name of the with-it press: at a minimum, this includes *October*, *Details*, *Rolling Stone*, *W*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Observer*.

As clearly as New York is the with-it capital of the United States, just so clearly is Chicago, my own city, nicely out of it. The pretensions of with-it-ry—in culture, in fashion, in social life—somehow don't seem to go down at all well in Chicago. Some people in Chicago do attempt to be with-it, but in the act of doing so they tend to seem faintly ridiculous. With-it clothes, for example, don't really succeed here. The characteristic male physique in Chicago is that of the Mayors Daley, *père et fils*, or the Brothers Belushi: chunky, short in the legs, thick in the chest, and not at all made for the clothes of the moment, or any moment that I know, except perhaps the Visigoth invasion of Rome. Chicago is a city where no one is going to look down on you if you are carrying around an extra twenty or thirty pounds. (The food of choice is pizza and Italian beef-and-sausage combination sandwiches, which tend not to conduce to that starved-to-perfection look that marks the with-it of our day.) Great cultural institutions exist—the Chicago Symphony, the Art Institute, the Lyric Opera—and a fair amount of serious art gets made, but, owing to the necessary exclusions of serious culture, it is understood that they are not as central to the city as are the Chicago Bears, Bulls, Cubs, White Sox, and Blackhawks.

But even in the fastness of Chicago, with its anti-chic spirit, it isn't always easy to turn your back on what the rest of the world construes to be with-it. A decade or so ago, for example, I discovered that I had ceased to read much contemporary fiction. Faster than you can say Italo Calvino, I had fallen two Malamuds, three Roths, a Bellow-and-a-half, four Mailers, and five or six Updikes behind. I had let John Irving pass me by. So, too, Ann Beattie, Joan Didion, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Every book you read is a book you don't read, by my reckoning, and there were too many important non-contemporary books I had not yet read. Life, as everyone knows, is short, and it doesn't take long to learn just how damnably long inferior art can be.

Still, I had a bad conscience about not reading these novelists. Apart from the aesthetic pleasures it brings, the novel, I believe, is a great instrument of discovery. When it is going well, the novel brings the news—to my mind the only enduringly serious news—about what is going on in the human heart. So, attempting to quiet my bad conscience, and turn a few bucks at the same time, I signed on with a magazine to become its critic of contemporary fiction, thinking to catch up with all the Malamuds, Roths, Updikes, Beatties, Didions, Marquezes, and Mailers. And I did. On balance, I think I can report that it wasn't worth it. Either these writers had become worse or I had become smarter, perhaps a little of both, but I found they no longer spoke to, and certainly not for, me. As for the human heart, most of these writers turned out to be more concerned with organs four buttons below that.

I have begun to drop out again. I have taken a pass on what is promised to be the last of John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom novels: when Rabbit died, I failed to turn up at the funeral. I have not read Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, and don't intend to. I recently reached page 110 of Philip Roth's newest novel, *Operation Shylock*, and I called it quits, having decided



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that to finish his books you have to be at least as interested in Philip Roth as is the author. There is an American novelist named T. Something Boyle. The Something is a complicated name beginning with a *C* and has three or four syllables. I am perfectly content to think of him as T. Congressman Boyle, not being sufficiently interested—or perhaps being too complacently out of it—to bother even getting his name right. This is the second time I have bailed out on contemporary novelists, and it seems to me increasingly unlikely that I shall bail back in. I may be beautiful, as the blues song has it, but I'm goin' to die someday, so, I now tell myself, how 'bout a little serious reading before I pass away?

If a loss of interest in the news is another sign of being of out of it, I qualify here, too. Many years ago, living in New York, I used to read three newspapers a day. I now read one, the *New York Times*, and that I read reluctantly and, following the rule of prostitutes in Athens, never, never on a Sunday. I do not read a local paper, which renders me more than a little out of it in my own hometown. Not reading the *Chicago Tribune*, I usually do not know the names of the most recent serial killer in town, the most recently fired superintendent of schools, or the most recently traded hockey players. Somehow, though, I seem to get by.

I begin each day's *New York Times* by turning directly to the obituary page. This, I am told, is a standard old-guy's move. So be it. Yet who died seems to me the most important news. I am interested not only in famous deaths but in quaint ones, such as that of Ruth Ford, age ninety-two, who ran what sounds like a lovely store selling music boxes in Manhattan. The other morning I was surprised to find my own name on the obit page. Surely I hadn't become so out of it that I failed to notice my own death. I was relieved to discover that it was not I but a professor of philosophy at Amherst of the same name who had died. I hope my friends, reading this obituary, were similarly relieved. If my enemies were sorely disappointed, they should not worry: I promise to make it up to them eventually.

I next turn to the letters columns, looking for—and not very often finding—a man after my own heart. I glimpse the op-ed page, filled, as V. S. Naipaul once noted about a character he despised in his novel *Guerrillas*, with so many opinions that do not add up to a point of view. I read perhaps two editorials a week, usually not all the way through, but quickly turning to the last few sentences—the bottom line, you might say. I blaze through the foreign news, turning away with a wince from the standard stories of barbarity and natural disaster in the Third World. I read the national news for accounts of scandal, political squalor, decline and fall generally. I probably read the pages devoted to the arts—news and reviews of fiddlers and scribblers, daubers and dancers—more thoroughly than any others, though I come away from them no more satisfied for my greater effort. Like the eighty-year-old bachelor in a V. S. Pritchett story, I have begun to pick up each morning's paper searching for something that will annoy me—and, happy to report, I almost always find it.

Skimming the newspaper seems luxurious to me. Once, when I worked on a political magazine, I used to have to read the *New York Times* with great attention to stories that held no intrinsic interest for me. I had to note the exact spelling of the name of the latest ephemeral revolutionary party in Peru, the absence of N. V. Podgorny from the photograph of members of the Soviet Central Committee, the name and party affiliation of every member of the United States Senate. I was allowed to stop only at the prices of cocoa in Ghana.

Not long after I departed this job, letting natural interest be my guide, I began to eliminate entire categories of newspaper stories from my reading. Stories about agriculture went first. Space exploration followed. I soon ceased to read anything about central Africa. On the subjects of Latin America and the Indian subcontinent no one has ever accused me of being duomaniacal, and, based on my newspaper reading, no one ever will. I read stories about the environment only intermittently. I rarely read stories about the economy, contenting myself with knowledge at the headline level of detail; if professional economists can't understand the economy—as, clearly, they cannot—what chance have I?

I continue to read stories about blacks and Jews, murder and rape, the disgrace of politicians, the fall in educational standards, people making jackasses of themselves. I check the sports page, but, fortunately, the *New York Times* has so poor a sports page that it does not detain me long. My lapsed interest in the news might trouble me more if I didn't recall the



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novelist Isaac Bashevis Singer once telling me (I never played gin rummy with his mother, by the way) that he preferred the *New York Daily News* to the *New York Times*. "It's a vonderful paper, the *Daily News*, Mr. Aristides," I remember Singer saying in his strong greenhorn accent, "filled mid every kind of moider, scandal, and disgusting act. Just poifect for a novelist."

Reading the *New York Times* in so glancing a way, I find I no longer know many of the names of the paper's regular reporters and critics, where once I knew every last Drew, Brooks, Harrison, and Clifton among them. But then neither do I know the names of the editors of *Time* or *Newsweek*, where once I knew nearly the full mastheads of both magazines. I know a dentist who claims to have practically lost his practice when he canceled his office subscription to *People*, but in my dentist's office I am not even tempted by the rag. What's the point? If the redoubtable Cher were to move in with an elephant I suppose I would read about it, though before the day is out I am certain to have forgotten the elephant's name.

As a result of all this non-attention to the news, I am not sure that today I can name more than twenty members of the United States Senate, where once I knew them all. I know the name of my alderman, but I had lately to be reminded of the name of my congressman. I cannot tell you the names of the prime ministers of Italy, India, or Algeria, among other countries. With the exception of Kurt Waldheim, I cannot tell you the name of a secretary-general of the United Nations since U Thant. What I chiefly remember about Mr. Thant is that he allowed himself to be badly snookered by a New York landlord, and he wound up having to pay an outrageously high rent on his apartment. This incident made me think at the time that, if you were ready to believe in the efficacy of the United Nations, you might be interested in some real estate I could show you.

I note, too, that I am less attentive to new slang and jargon than I once was. Even when I learn what new phrases mean, I don't find many of them very interesting, and I almost never use them, except for comic purpose. I don't mean merely the obviously stupid language of political correctness—with its silly *isms* (fattism, ageism, classism) and *abled*s (differently, otherly, uniquely)—which only an imbecile would take seriously anyway. I never say "focused" and, myself, try to stay "unfocused." (A recent *New York Times* obit for a professor of French at Columbia carried the subtitle, "A Focus on Diderot.") I blanch at the new use of *fun* as an adjective, as in fun couple, fun time, fun run. Sometimes I find I not only dislike a term—*graphic* novel, for example, for a novel-length comic book—but the very thing it describes. This category includes "dramadoc" and "docutainments"; also, while the bad taste is still in my mouth, "infomercials" and "infopreneurs." Let us not speak—you won't catch me doing so—of "foodies," "compassion fatigue," "cruelty-free," or "cocooning." Hey, dude, I tell myself once I get going on this subject, chill out.

Reading the with-it press often doesn't chill me out but merely chills me. There I see and instantly forget the names of movie starlets of whom I have not previously heard. I read about young entrepreneurs—usually designers, or gym-shoe manufacturers, or "infopreneurs," many of them—who seem to me empty of everything but the harsh emotions connected with the kind of ambition that has nothing behind it but the sheer desire to get ahead. I thumb through an issue of *Esquire* or *Vanity Fair* and nothing, not even the ads, holds any interest for me. In the pages of these magazines, as a line from an old song has it, "I just don't see me anywhere."

For the first time, I have begun to skim in my reading, often bottom-lining an article after giving it a three- or four-paragraph shot at arousing my interest. I bottom-line on the assumption that there is nothing useful I can learn from the article, or there is nothing sufficiently interesting to be worth stealing from its author's prose, or there is nothing in it that is going to stay in my mind anyhow. Skimming seems eminently sensible to me, but because it is something I never used to do—Justice Holmes claimed to finish every book he began and ceased to do so only in his seventy-fifth year—it also seems to me another sign of falling out of it.

Is this intensification of my out-of-it-ness no more than a sign of getting older? Getting older of course means—and here I do not euphemize—getting closer to death. In *The Sixties*, the last volume of his journals, Edmund Wilson, then in his late sixties and in poor health, comments again and again on how



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"the knowledge that death is not far away . . . has the effect of making earthly affairs seem unimportant. . . . And [it is] harder to take human life seriously, including one's own passions and achievements and efforts." Wilson attests to feeling "the *flimsiness of human life*," where, "surrounded by the void of the universe, we agitate ourselves, one sometimes feels, to very dubious purpose."

Death, even the hint of death, has a way of making nearly everything else trivial. I was walking away from reading a petulant review of a recent book of mine, beginning to work up a temporary but genuine sulk about it, when I met an acquaintance who told me he had been discovered to have colon cancer. I'll take, I thought to myself, the bad review. Can it be that I am gaining a modicum of perspective, some distant hint of what is important and what is utterly beside the point in life? If so, this could be troublesome, for true perspective will put a person out of it faster than anything going. With perspective, one hears the dogs barking as the caravans hove out of sight and knows that future caravans will follow, each of them soon enough also to disappear. Why be one of the barking dogs?

As one grows older, there is, I suppose, something appropriate, even natural, about falling out of it. To be old and too much with-it, in the same way, can be quite unseemly. A man in his sixties ought not to write a book about Michael Jackson; a woman of seventy ought not to dress like Janet Jackson. (I wish I didn't know those two names.) The quickest way I know to be called Pops or Old-Timer is to show up at a rock concert wearing a ponytail when you're in your fifties.

I suppose a happy medium is possible in all this. I have friends in their seventies with a serious interest in the performing arts, who make it their business to see most movies, plays, and dance groups going—as sometime theatrical producers, they have a professional interest—and they do it with dignity and without any of the heavy breathing one generally hears when older people try to stay with-it. Edmund Wilson, too, attempted to stay with-it, within reasonable limits. He continued to go to the theater, to comedy reviews, to the movies, to the occasional nightclub (the tumult from which, he allowed, "stunned" him). But he reserved the right, sacred to the old, to find the young wanting, complaining at one point that he found it regrettable that so many of the young among the artists and intellectuals he knew in New York and Boston were in psychoanalysis.

In my own out-of-it-ness, though, I sense something more going on than my own growing older and, hence, nearer to pegging out. I think a good bit about death, but not, I believe, obsessively. While I have allowed that there is much about our time that is not to my taste, I am not in anything like the condition of Edmund Wilson's friend Dorothy Sharp, who, he says, "dislikes everything that is going on (but I and so many of my generation feel the same way). . . . It is plain that she is losing the will to live." A number of the acts featured just now in our cultural and political life may irritate me, but I still enjoy the show and have no intention of giving up my seat any sooner than I have to. No, something deeper is going on.

What it may be is a decisive change in sensibility, leading to a similarly decisive change in character, some of it generational, that makes it impossible for me to partake fully in contemporary culture. I have tried to formulate what is behind these changes, but without much success. Then, not long ago, I came upon the following interesting passage in an essay by Martin Amis, son of Kingsley. In an essay in *The New Yorker* in defense of the poet Philip Larkin, who has been posthumously under attack for improper opinions, Martin Amis writes:

> Larkin the man is separated from us, historically, by changes in the self. For his generation, you were what you were, and that was that. It made you unswervable and adamantine. My father has this quality. I don't. None of us [persons in Martin Amis's own generation] do. There are too many forces at work on us. There are too many fronts to cover. In the age of self-improvement, the self is inexorably self-conscious. Still, a price has to be paid for not caring what others think of you, and Larkin paid. He couldn't change the cards he was dealt ("What poor hands we hold,/When we face each other honestly!").

I wish Martin Amis had gone on to say more on this point, especially about those "forces at work on us" as well as about those "fronts" too numerous to cover. He does not specify what they might be, but I suspect he is falling back on all-too-vague military metaphors for the struggle to stay with-it in a culture that changes so rapidly. One of the reasons it



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changes so rapidly, of course, is that so many people—friends of Martin Amis if not of Philip Larkin—are ready to go along with every change, lest, terror of terrors, they be found out of it.

Yet who wishes to be with-it if the price is an almost endless changing of one's personality to accommodate those "forces" and those "fronts"? There are—perhaps there always have been—those who are ready to go with the flow, with its quick current, not particularly minding swimming amidst all the detritus in those muddy and churning waters. Such people pride themselves on being exceedingly knowing, above the ruck, with the show, perennial insiders over whose toes nobody but nobody pulls the wool. The aesthetic tends to be the chief criterion for such people. What is taken for style or taste is generally the basis for all their judgments; and style and taste, in the end, are made to stand in for virtue. To have opinions not congruent with theirs—however often theirs change—is, somehow, poor style and bad taste.

It is unclear to what end all this knowingness and aesthetic judgment is directed. It is equally unclear to what end the self-improvement Martin Amis refers to is to be carried on. (Endless self-improvement always reminds me of Santayana, in his eighties, remarking, apropos of a physician suggesting that he lose twenty or so pounds, that he obviously wishes to have him perfectly healthy in time for his death.) The with-it of our day, as Martin Amis suggests, see no reason to play the cards they were dealt. Instead they see themselves in a game that might be called endless draw poker in which you keep turning in your cards till you find a hand that you can work with, always with the proviso that this, too, can be turned in at a later time should the aesthetic winds shift and leave you suddering out in the cold.

I prefer being out in the cold with my own well-worn but comfortably out-of-it notions. These include: that there are a number of unchanging ideas—none of them particularly stylish—worth fighting for; that honor is immitigable; that so, too, is dignity, despite the almost inherent ridiculousness of human beings; that one's life is a work of art, however badly botched, which can be restored and touched up here and there but not fundamentally changed; that, in connection with this, integrity includes coherence of personality; that elegance, where possible, is very nice, but there are many things more important than style, loyalty and decency among them; that a cello is a finer instrument than an electric guitar; and that a man ought to start out the day with a clean handkerchief. I hope I speak for others who are out of it when I say that we take these truths to be self-evident. And, as those of us who are out of it have learned, when it comes to most of the really important truths, no other kind of evidence is usually available.



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# Dealing in Russia

MATTHEW STEVENSON

BEFORE PRIVATIZATION BECAME a popular Russian icon, V. I. Lenin, who was skeptical of shareholder participation, liked to boast that the West would sell him the rope that he needed to hang capitalism. Unfortunately for Russia, he found enough rope in the domestic market to keep his buyers busy for more than seventy years. And although such a strategy was useful to control the board of directors, it left the country dependent on a product that had little demand outside North Korea and Albania.

It was in the spirit of a rope salesman that I started traveling to Russia in the autumn of 1991. Before departing, I collected the names of bankers to contact on arrival, received a mandate to place credits for Western food, and departed on the Swissair flight from Zurich to Moscow that was as tightly sealed with its own revolutionary sentiments as the railcar that brought Lenin to the Finland Station.

The plane followed the narrow corridor that tracks from Warsaw and Vilnius into the Russian capital. I read the *Wall Street Journal*, glanced at a backlog of faxes, and weighed the choice of red or white wine to accompany the smoked salmon—easier rites of passage than that, as in revolutionary days, of worrying about a wig and a disguise.

The international airport, Sheremetyevo, is twenty miles northwest of Moscow, in farmland reminiscent of the lakes near Minneapolis. Small clusters of dachas mix with pine forests, and vast uncultivated fields convey a forlorn sense of neglect, as if the tractors had been repossessed with the party. On this particular December evening, the countryside was blanketed with Moscow's trademark frozen fog, and the pilot let the plane roll on landing, much as a skier avoids his edges on an icy run.

I have always been apprehensive when crossing East European borders, and remain so, even though the Berlin Wall is now nothing more than concrete fragments on sale for tourists. Over the years I have been denied entry into Hungary for want of a picture, hassled at

✪ MATTHEW STEVENSON manages a bank overseas. His most recent contribution to THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR was "Letter from Serbia."



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the Czech frontier, and searched at gunpoint in Romania. On this occasion, I had reason for concern, for I was entering Russia without a visa.

During the Cold War, such informality would have been unthinkable. But now Western businessmen are the commissars, I was traveling—of all revisionist things—business class, and the Russian consulate in Switzerland had sent instructions for the visa to be issued on my arrival at Sheremetyevo.

Teenage soldiers, as if part of a scout troop dedicated to indolence, guard Russian airports. One steered me toward the consulate. In a few minutes I was telling my story to an immigration officer, although he never looked up from the scraps of paper officialdom that once bound the Soviet Union. The consular office had the ambiance of a freight forwarder, and it was full of young men, like the one I was addressing, who gave the impression of having forgotten why they were posted to these particular gray metal desks.

The examining magistrate flipped through a sheaf of telexes, took several unrelated phone calls, and then, turning surly, said that I had violated Soviet law and would be deported in the morning. I made the usual protests and even called my hosts—senior Russian officials—who had arranged for the visa. But they said nothing could be done on a Sunday evening. I considered, but then rejected, the possibility of extending to the consular section the capitalist notion of incentive compensation, as my tormentor's brown suit hinted of a man still humming union hymns.

In the manner of Herr K. in *The Trial* who was told, "I am no longer obliged to hear you," I was asked to wait outside for further instructions. Another adolescent soldier arrived and signaled for me to collect my bags. I followed him down lonely corridors at Sheremetyevo, where I knew that the last flights to the West had departed.

Our footsteps echoed the cadence of a spy being brought in from the cold, even though we ended up outside on the tarmac, which was thick with fog and the whine of jet engines. I became the only passenger on a dark, freezing bus, which in mid-winter had its doors and windows open. In the eerie half-light of the runway, we drove along a fleet of mothballed Aeroflot jets, now being stripped for parts. The setting was from John Le Carré, although the skeletal remains of socialism were images from *Clockwork Orange*.

Maybe I was to be put aboard a plane and dispatched to the frontier? Maybe they did something else with Western businessmen who tried to sneak into the country and give away food? We stopped in front of a tall building on the edge of the airport, and I was led to a



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guarded door that only opened with a key. Inside was a hotel, although not the kind that has fruit baskets waiting in the rooms.

Left in the custody of the hotel staff, I was led by the concierge to a locked wing on the ninth floor. Everything about the hall and the room I was given reminded me of my freshman dormitory, except that no one was chilling beer in a wastepaper basket. Small groups of young men were huddled in several doorways, as if reviewing *Playboy*. Undoubtedly, they were visa scofflaws from countries such as Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Angola—places where the red star was setting on the Soviet empire. They filled the hall with laughter, wall pounding, and loud voices, and after a while it became clear that what was to me the Gulag was to them Ellis Island.

The dining room, where I could go on my own, was a cavernous, dimly lit hall with the air of a Jamaican nightclub. Russian tobacco has the pungency of ganja, and a number of my fellow travelers wore braided Rastafarian hats—another lost tribe of Africa confused about the immigration requirements for Nirvana. My interest in dinner waned after the stale bread course, and I returned to my room for a supper of Swiss chocolates. I assumed I would be deported in the morning and passed an unsettled night, scanning my shortwave radio for the BBC and wondering if Susan Sontag would champion my cause in the *New York Review of Books*.

In the morning I was put back on the bus and returned to the same desk at the airport consulate, although this time it was manned by another officer. He heard my story, flipped through the telexes, found the instructions, issued the visa, and waved me away, without even the hint of an apology. I cleared customs, found a taxi for the ride into Moscow, and, eighteen hours behind schedule, finally meant business.

In the last two years I have made more than ten trips to the former Soviet Union, visited a number of the republics, shivered in unheated hotel rooms, met with presidents and finance ministers, shared overnight train compartments with strangers, walked the ruined splendors of Samarkand and Bukhara, negotiated with trade unionists, set up several Russian offices, and read authors like Boris Pasternak and Alexandr Solzhenitsyn while waiting to be seen by one of their former tormentors.

In the right disposition, when asked what I think is Russia's future, I can easily sing its economic praises. I have set speeches on its oil in Siberia, its educated population, why the current accounts are really in surplus, or why the country's respect for literature will make the change easier from communism to democracy. But left waiting in a



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cold terminal for a canceled flight, betrayed in a business deal, or reminded that Russia tolerated Lenin or Joseph Stalin as leaders, I can also paint its geopolitical landscape in the images of Salvador Dalí, in which the hands on the molten clock point toward ethnic violence or where economic development is a steam engine attempting to haul freight in a world of semi-conductors.

Most of my trips are to Moscow, an imperial city although one of power instead of glory. To be sure, the Kremlin, Red Square, and St. Basil's Cathedral are ornaments of empire, even if, in their midst, the polished marble of Lenin's tomb casts a reflection of death. Moscow's boulevards are the width of parade grounds, although that has less to do with changings of the guard and more to do with thwarting barricades. The skyline is punctuated with steeples and red stars, gargoyles of central planning, that were added to hotels, office buildings, and party headquarters in the manner that Karl Marx finished most phrases with the word materialism.

Beyond the inner ring of the city, Moscow is dreary, more the Bronx than Berlin. Nearly every building in the city needs paint, plaster, and new brickwork, although the cobbled sidewalks and potholed streets make it hard to tell if the fault lines are geological or geopolitical. The better apartment buildings have the lobbies and hallways usually found outside crack dens. Most Moscovites live in vast tombstones of public housing that dot the city limits much the way, in New York, the borough of Queens has its acres of cemeteries.

Nevertheless, the sense of life on the edge—the food shortages, the political intrigues, and the constant fear of rebellion—gives Moscow the excitement of a frontier town. Rumors are its lifeblood. The talk on an average day has President Yeltsin dead, Lithuania invaded, Mikhail Gorbachev returning, Chernobyl smoldering, or Siberia voting for secession.

Nowhere is the flavor of the frontier stronger than in Moscow's new collection of five-star hotels. Although they have been given names to convey the impression of established wealth—Savoy, Metropol, Palace, etc.—in reality, they are best understood as Yukon saloons. Not only does each have a lobby bar filled with prostitutes—women smothered in fur to tempt wealthy trappers—but all the hotels project the buy-and-sell fever of a gold-rush general store. To wit:

Prospectors, who in the West are senior officials of major corporations, come and go to meetings in black Volga sedans, all of which are encrusted with mud and have the look of covered wagons, if not getaway cars.

Businessmen who would not dream of speaking to anyone in a Kansas City Sheraton find themselves in Moscow passing out their calling cards in elevators.



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At breakfast one morning at the Olympic Penta, a stranger at the buffet tried to sell me an oil refinery.

During a lunch at the Metropol, I sat near a notorious swindler who conned millions from the banks in Australia but who has since opened shop in Moscow.

I have had endless dinners with middlemen offering billion-dollar oil deals, even though their annual salary is less than the cost of the wine.

As in any boomtown, speculation is rampant, and there are no small deals. Moscow is desperate for vegetable stands, restaurants, car washes, dry cleaners, and hardware stores, to name a few essentials missing from the streets. But most people in business are selling oceans of natural gas, tons of gold, timber concessions the size of Michigan, or used MIG aircraft.

The historian Hugh Seton-Watson wrote that nineteenth-century Russia failed to develop a merchant class: "There was no such bourgeoisie in Russia: even the merchants had little of the outlook of Western businessmen. They thought far too much in terms of exclusive guild privileges and favours from the government, to which they were prepared to give unreserved political obedience." Nor, to put it gently, did communism have an interest in cultivating shopkeepers.

As a result, Russian capitalism has no forebears. Its banks are not heir to the tradition of Venetian trade houses. Its farms have never calculated forward prices in Chicago. Its law firms have never searched for titles. Its financial statements missed the evolution of double-entry accounting. Yet under the current let-the-market-rule philosophy, each has to compete with German, French, and American corporations. The sports analogy would involve a Bedouin tribe that, after many years of subscribing to *Sports Illustrated*, decides to challenge the Atlanta Braves.

Having seen capitalism only in the magazines, the Russians have embraced the free market as if it were synonymous only with gold rushes. Deals are promoted feverishly, no matter how long the odds. Small ruble stakes are imagined transformed into dollar-sized fortunes. Anyone pitching business to the West boasts the coordinates of a lode and a sure-fire method of assay. All they usually lack is someone to finance the pan and the donkey.

In addition to divining rods, the Russian economy has retained its faith in what Seton-Watson calls "guild privileges." The market ends where the influencers start peddling. Inevitably they know someone who knows a minister who knows Yeltsin. Always a scarce resource is to be allocated. The business is awarded to those with the finest pedigree.



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Most distracting of all is that in the collapse of the central system all sense of institutional loyalty has been lost, as if everyone on the deal side of the frontier has no need for a passport. In most meetings, it is impossible to tell if the men seated in front of you are government ministers, corporate executives, or buccaneers. Usually they have the qualities and business cards for all three professions. The only thing that is clear is that everyone at the table has come to split a jackpot.

Although much of Russian capitalism is developing along the lines of a ward meeting on Chicago's South Side, it also has antecedents in the five-year plan. In the West, business means selling a product or a service. If something develops, documents—a contract, an order, or a sales receipt—are exchanged. In Russia, however, business means negotiating protocols.

Before my travels, I had heard of protocols only in connection with news stories about the United Nations. But in the last two years, I have negotiated and signed dozens. These memoranda of agreement resemble legal contracts that are for sale in stationery stores. Usually the preamble includes a phrase such as: "Whereas the parties wish to develop certain Siberian oil fields. . . ." The required action is always: "The parties agree, within 60 days, to conduct feasibility studies. . . ." And the hard bargaining begins over the clauses that set forth "the terms of this joint-venture."

One reason that there has been so little progress with the Russian economy is that negotiating these protocols has become the end, not the means, of business, an elaborate mating ritual that rarely leads to marriage or children. All over Moscow, Western businessmen, assisted by an interpreter, are drafting these memoranda, as if their work was to set forth the articles of the Treaty of Joint Understanding for Bulgarian-Romanian Economic Exchange.

Usually the meetings are held in a grandiose ministry office, where, from above the director's desk, the scowl of Lenin still scans a vast conference table. Western and Russian delegations sit opposite each other, as in the *Life* magazine photographs of Andrey Gromyko meeting Dean Rusk. Assistants serve mineral water that tastes as if it has been drained from a swimming pool. Seating arrangements follow old party lines.

Except in a few instances, the Russians prohibit 100 percent foreign investment and require that Western companies form partnerships with a local entity. Usually the joint-venture partner is a defunct state ministry, drilled in methodology of central planning, that somehow has succeeded in taking itself private: an odd cross between a



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management buyout and the axiom that possession is nine-tenths of the law. Everyone grasps the possible business at hand, and the negotiations race ahead at the beginning, especially as the Russians assume that those seated in front of them are prepared to invest millions in projects where the only details available are on the back of an envelope.

Most protocol negotiations hit a snag over a problem of language and interpretation—What is goodwill? How do you calculate the prime rate?—not to mention the question over how the seller, usually a Western company, will be paid. Even when they are signed, most protocols end up in the dustbin of deals because Russia lacks the legal, financial, accounting, or banking systems around which the business can be done. Those acquiring Russian real estate cannot prove title. No reliable standards exist to verify financial statements or the contents in a warehouse.

Hence Russian business is still a mixture of barter and central planning, except where American dollars are the unit of exchange. But it is impossible to say who owns what in a collectivized free market. Is it the state, the city, the regional council, the management, or the workers? Under Lenin's formula, the Soviet Union owned everything. But with communism in liquidation, the means of production belong to anyone who can load a tanker in Odessa.

Most hindering to the economy is that the Russian ruble is not a currency—what Adam Smith once defined as "the great wheel of circulation, the great instrument of commerce"—but Monopoly money that stores none of the value of the country and is worthless in international trade. Nevertheless, Russia clings to the ruble because it is a symbol of nationalism, in the same way that islands of the Pacific continue to issue commemorative stamps.

Many that I meet, especially the hard-money men of the Central Bank, insist that Russia must support its currency, and in Moscow one hears speculation of moves to make local dollar transactions illegal. Unfortunately, many of those who are sentimental about a national currency also have a hand in its depreciation.

Under the Soviets, the ruble was less a unit of exchange and more a monetary caste system. Rather than have its value fluctuate in relation to gold, silver, or a basket of world currencies, the ruble was fixed to political expedience. Rates of exchange to the dollar, for example, varied for tourists, foreign investors, state banks, and the industrial sector. There were also two kinds of rubles: cash rubles, bank notes with etchings of the Kremlin or Lenin that workers used in the stores; and transferable rubles, bank credits issued by the government that



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could not be converted to cash, but which the industrial sector used to settle payments and debts. The tiered-ruble system, which is lingering, explains why Russia can have runaway inflation and a paucity of ruble notes, or why the shortage of paper and ink does not constitute the foundation of a corrective monetary policy.

Under Boris Yeltsin, the ruble became a convertible currency, in theory no different than the lira or the French franc. When I made my first trip in 1991, the tourist rate was 35 rubles to one dollar, but in official exchanges one dollar equaled 60 kopecks or 0.60 rubles. As I write, it requires 812 rubles to purchase one dollar, although a month ago it was 650. A year ago the rate was 120. Such a drop might give the ruble status as a wheelbarrow currency, were there not in Russia a shortage of farm equipment.

The loss of confidence in the ruble is a result of hyper-inflation, estimated in 1993 at 1400 percent. Under the Soviets, wages and prices were fixed far below world market values. Rents were $4 a month, because salaries were $20 and because the state provided most services, like education and medicine, free. Now that Russia has a market system, prices have increased—in some cases to their dollar-equivalent level—although wages reflect the low productive capacity of most Russian businesses. A meal in a Western restaurant could cost 168,000 rubles (about $200), although for a typical Russian that would amount to a salary for three years.

Adam Smith made the point that money's worth was relative to what it would acquire, and at present in Russia the ruble buys little. Hence a new Volga automobile costs 12,000,000 rubles in an era when Mikhail Gorbachev's pension was set at 4,400 rubles monthly. Another serious cause of inflation is that there is no control over government credits. Each month, the money supply expands exponentially because parliament, through the Central Bank, is pumping trillions of rubles into an economy of inefficient state enterprises, vast bureaucracy, and social welfare, all of which makes American defense spending, by comparison, look like a Japanese quality circle. Rubles are also being dumped into Russia from the former Soviet republics, such as Estonia and Ukraine, which are now issuing their own currency. In Moscow, stories circulate, perhaps apocryphal, of trains laden with small-denomination currency crossing the frontier to settle foreign exchange contracts.

The first president of Cornell University, Andrew Dickson White, delivered a lecture to Congress in 1876 that established the link between what he called fiat money in France, the circulation of worthless currency, and the terrors of the French Revolution. He could well have defined the problem with Russian democracy two hundred years



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later: "The main cause of these evils was tampering with the circulating medium of an entire nation: keeping all values in fluctuation; discouraging enterprise; paralyzing energy; undermining sobriety; obliterating thrift; promoting extravagance; and exciting riot by the issue of an irredeemable currency."

When traveling in Russia, I often visit banks outside of Moscow. Without giving away company secrets, our goal in Russia is to develop a network of regional banks. Toward that end I spend time with bankers from such cities as Ufa, Tomsk, Ekaterinburg, and Vladivostok.

Despite my optimism for the future of Russian finance, I acknowledge that a capitalist economy is only as strong as its banking system. And in Russia today, most banks are bankrupt. Under the old Soviet Union, banks were an extension of the budget office. Loans were advances of that year's budget allocation, and repayment came from next year's allotment or from a state insurance scheme. The credit worthiness of a borrower was immaterial, as the state was lending money to itself. When the Soviets fell, their debtors happily defaulted. Banks and state enterprises were left holding bags of worthless receivables.

To Russia's credit, the domestic banking industry is oblivious to its insolvency and has aspirations to thrive. Every company, no matter how insignificant, wants to open a bank, and more than two thousand have been chartered since the collapse of the Soviets. Often these banks are located in former party offices, which means that some of the waiting rooms have portraits of Marx and Engels, as if they were retired chairmen. Others are in dilapidated brick tenements, and the offices are rabbit warrens filled with clerks reconciling accounts, which are kept with carbon paper and stacked in corners. They conjure up images of Blanche Dubois as a branch manager.

Most banks lack dollar-denominated assets, such as gold or foreign currency, and watch their capital deteriorate at the rate of inflation, which far surpasses what they charge on loans. But this point is lost on most bankers. I have sat through many meetings where I am told proudly that the bank under discussion earned 150 percent on its capital last year, even though inflation diminished that same equity by 2000 percent.

As difficult for the banking system has been the collapse of the Bank for Foreign Trade, known as Vnesheconombank, which collected all of the country's foreign earnings and paid interest and principal on the foreign debt. All the state organizations and banks that earned foreign currency were required to maintain accounts at Vnesheconombank, which functioned as a cross between a central bank and moonshine revenuers.



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When the Soviet Union dissolved, Vnesheconombank froze most of the accounts with foreign currency, in a desperate attempt to bolster its dollar reserves. Companies and banks with dollars in the bank had, in effect, their accounts nationalized. For a while such confiscation allowed the Vnesheconombank to service the debt obligations of the defunct Soviet Union. But then the money ran out, and many of the former Soviet republics refused to contribute to pay off the Soviet debt.

The default has taken the capital out of Russian capitalism. Foreign banks refuse to lend money there, and foreign investors fear losing their equity. Thus the lender of last resort is the patchwork of foreign aid. But the West is not lending to a Third World country that is poor or lacks natural resources. Russia has the oil of Saudi Arabia, the gold of South Africa, and the wheat of Canada. It also has the unionism of Argentina, the corruption of Brazil, and the bureaucracy of China.

On one of my recent trips, I met the chairman of the Central Bank of Russia, Viktor Gerashchenko, who is often blamed for many of the country's economic problems. Directly or indirectly, he is responsible for the Russian banking system, including Vnesheconombank, the money supply, and the repayment of the foreign debt, none of which is having a record year. Not only is Gerashchenko charged with causing the great inflation, by pumping trillions of ruble credits into the economy, but there is also the accusation that his is the invisible hand behind the fall of the ruble and the plan to swap old rubles into new ones.

I found myself drawn to Gerashchenko, despite his notoriety. He gives the impression of being an independent thinker, an experienced and technically sound banker, and receptive to new ideas. Most engaging of all is his fondness for American literature. We met in his ballroom-sized office. Although he has the jowls of a party war-horse, a sparkle in his eyes leavens his appearance, and his speech is laced with allusions to F. Scott Fitzgerald and Theodore Dreiser, both of whom had few ideas about the vicissitudes of wealth.

Without searching for scapegoats, Gerashchenko let it be known that it is the Russian parliament, not the Central Bank, that controls the money supply. Although he did not draw the analogy, it would be as if members of the U.S. Congress could print money and mail it out with their constituent letters. He spoke despairingly of the dollar revenue that now avoids the tax system and thus is unavailable to support the ruble or pay the interest on foreign debt. Banks, compa-



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nies, and even governmental authorities, if possible, keep their money in dollars and away from the grasp of Moscow.

One solution to which Gerashchenko alluded was foreign exchange controls, the old system of tiered rates for ruble-dollar conversion. By his reasoning it would allow Russia to defend its currency, collect taxes, and pay its debts. But it was an unconvincing argument, a remembrance of things past, and it confirmed Joseph Conrad's pessimism about the possibility of change in Russia. As Conrad wrote in *Under Western Eyes*:

> In Russia, the land of spectral ideas and disembodied aspiration, many brave minds have turned away at last from the vain and endless conflict to the one great historical fact of the land. They turned to autocracy for the peace of their patriotic conscience as a weary unbeliever, touched by grace, turns to the faith of his fathers for the blessing of spiritual rest.

Even though I disagree with a return to the monetary rest of tiered exchange rates, I found myself sympathetic to Gerashchenko's plight. He understands that Russia needs a sound currency to bolster its banking system, balance its budget, retire its debt obligations, and trade with the West. But like Dick Diver in Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, he is a bystander to a collapse which is also his own.

Advice on how to solve economic problems is one of the few products the West is willing to provide Russia on open account. Salesmen, dressed up as experts from the World Bank or International Monetary Fund, besiege the president's office, parliament, and various ministries with arguments about why Russia should curb inflation, privatize its industry, repay its debt, retrain its workers, pump more oil, stabilize its currency, and convert its munitions plants into Home Depots. Sadly, the Russian government takes advice seemingly from anyone, as if each were a Siberian monk and able to prevent the young economy from hemorrhaging.

One of the more peripatetic advisers is Professor Jeffrey Sachs, from Harvard University, an economic mendicant who is counseling the Yeltsin government on privatization. Sachs's reputation is for advocating so-called shock therapy—that is, ending the subsidies for inefficient state enterprises and letting the markets rule. He is heir to the tradition of Professor Milton Friedman, who lectured to the Chileans about the sanctity of monetary restraint, or even to the Christian missionaries who preached the value of abstinence.

Conferences on the deliverance of the Russian economy are held with the frequency of golf tournaments, and Sachs is one of the touring pros. At a conference in Frankfurt, where the *Wall Street Jour-*



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*nal* was charging $1,000 greens fees, I heard him deliver his standard lecture. Listening to him read a prepared text in a dull monotone, I could not help but think of the Great Oz's confession to Dorothy: "I found myself in the midst of a strange people, who, seeing me come from the clouds, thought I was a great Wizard."

Sachs advocates for Russia a strict adherence to market doctrine. Russia, he holds, should privatize industry, end subsidies, restrict the money supply to curb inflation, and use foreign aid to provide both companies and the country with relief from debt obligations. Large enterprises would fail, jobs would be lost, and Russia would be tested in crossing a "valley of tears," conditions much like those today in Russia but still a distance from the Emerald City.

The problem with granting Russia courage for privatization is that it conjures up the image of an inefficient defense plant, perhaps one making nerve gas, transformed into a public corporation with a line of vacuum cleaners and happy shareholders. Although it is easy to change the shareholders of a state enterprise and have it become what is known as a joint-stock company, what does not change is that the new corporation is usually as starved for capital as the old one.

I have no doubt that if Russia follows the advice of Sachs the economy will improve. At the moment it is the world's largest motor vehicle department, governed by arcane procedures, indifferent clerks, long lines, and regulations that read like eye charts. Under Sachs's mandates it would convert to a showroom or go out of business.

The political question is whether Russia has the patience to spend time in the valley of tears. For many Russians, even those who long ago gave up on Marx and Lenin, the preachings of capitalism evoke only the excesses of czars, the privileges of party officials, or the current generation of new men getting rich selling state assets for private gain. A market system brings to mind the cynicism of Fitzgerald or Dreiser, not the hardworking optimism of William Dean Howells: a businessman is Frank Cowperwood, not Silas Lapham. And not everyone in Russia wants to privatize the yellow-brick road.

As discouraged as I can get about Russia's prospect for solving its economic and political dilemmas, I never lose my affection for traveling in the country. Moscow in the snow evokes a Chekhov short story; in late summer the canals in St. Petersburg shimmer with the grandeur of Venice.

I developed a fondness for Russian travel in the summer of 1975, after I spent a junior year abroad in London and Vienna. During the Vienna semester, I took a course in dissident Soviet literature from a



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Professor Max Peyfuss, who spoke a number of East European languages and who edited underground magazines for distribution in the East. Often he would come to class with the story of a brief trip to Budapest to pick up a manuscript or a firsthand account of political intrigue in Bucharest.

I had enormous respect for Peyfuss's courage and a mixture of envy and admiration for a life that always had him in correspondence with famous dissidents or translating a Solzhenitsyn short story. I remember once seeing him through an elegant café window, seated before a beer and deep in conversation, no doubt on the Polish question. It was a peek at a life that I wanted to lead, and I signed up immediately when, at the end of the term, he decided to lead a trip to the Soviet Union. Marlow himself was to take us to the heart of darkness.

Just before our departure the Russians revoked Peyfuss's visa, which made us feel as if the Soviets would be watching our every move. The trip, however, proceeded without suspicion, although now we were just another group of students riding around Russia on a bus with worn seats and tired springs. (Bill Clinton made a similar trip during his college days, later arousing the suspicion of George Bush, who during the campaign implied that, while in Russia, his opponent had seen the future working. In fact, most American students who saw Russia under Soviet control concluded that they had seen the past and it was broken.)

Our trip, in high summer, was a series of harmless blunders, as if part of a silent movie. On arrival, we found that all our reservations had been canceled or never made. We were finally given a guide and bus and, after a while, rooms in a student hotel past the last stop on the Moscow metro. We spent the first few nights, when it was daylight until 11:00 P.M., wandering through Moscow's broad parks, eating ice cream, and drinking water from public machines that recycled the same glass for all customers.

Without reservations, we were shunted around the Soviet Union like so many lost railcars. In fact, someone in the Soviet travel hierarchy decided that we were best dealt with on the train. On many nights we were put aboard sleepers and dispatched from Moscow to a regional city, only to be returned to the capital on the train the following evening. As such, we saw little of tourist Russia. We were hustled through the Kremlin—between trains—but missed the Hermitage in Leningrad, where they put us on the night train to Tallinn. We missed Kiev, but had several days in Smolensk, idling in the Intourist hotel, waiting for the return express to Moscow.

Before arriving, I had images of Russia only from literature, for



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example, *The Gulag Archipelago* or the *House of the Dead.* I had expected *Darkness at Noon,* but instead encountered Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator.* I saw none of the country's nastiness: its police state, its frozen winters, its taste for alcohol. I went swimming in lakes edged with birch trees, retraced the steps of Napoleon in Smolensk, and spent a delightful summer day on the Baltic coast in Estonia.

For reasons of incompetence or perhaps crafty design, I had been shown a Russia of rural markets, provincial cities, and magnificent parks where no one I met cared anything for the Cold War, destroying the West, or joining the Comintern in Angola. I also saw that the Russian economy still functioned with ox carts and abacuses, hardly the great instruments of state that were going to color the rest of the European map red.

Most of all, perhaps unavoidably, I developed a love of Russian trains. Even though we were a foreign group, we were thrown randomly into Russian compartments, each containing six berths. Some bedrooms had parties through the night, with vodka for all. Others were transient hotels. I still remember strangers shuffling into their berths, snoring heavily for several hours, and then shuffling out, as anonymous as characters passing through a Russian novel.

In the morning, we would drink hot tea from glass cups that had silver holders, stare at the vastness of the plain or the monotony of the forests, and arrive at our destination in time for breakfast, although where we were headed was usually where the train was stopping at eight o'clock that morning.

It was a short trip, not enough time to do more than look out the window, and we left by ferry from Tallinn to Helsinki on a glorious, blue summer day. We developed a fondness for Russians but decided the Soviet Union was a lost cause. As Marlow remembered his passage upstream: "We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse."

Traveling in Russia has changed little in the last twenty years, except for the five-star hotels in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Aeroflot, the state airline, is still a national lottery in which ticket holders gamble on their chances of arrival. City traffic is a great game of chicken, in which the median of any road is the line of passing cars. And the hotels are all part of the Intourist chain, which seized on the idea that travelers would be comforted to find the same dreary room and broken plumbing no matter where they are in Russia.

The trains are also as I remember them—long lines of green metallic cars, each with a red star and the embossed "CCCP" crest. Usu-



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ally the ones I take now are the night trains between Moscow and St. Petersburg. There is a wonderful feeling of intrigue and romance, especially in winter when the snow swirls on the platforms, to board a sleeper at midnight in either city, to ride through the cold night on a berth piled high with heavy woolen blankets, and then to drink the same hot tea that evokes summer mornings of 1975.

One of my trips to St. Petersburg ended early on a weekend, and I had no reason to rush home to Switzerland. I decided to take the express either to Warsaw or Berlin, and then fly from there. But the cost of a ticket to Poland was five hundred dollars, so I settled on a second-class sleeper to Vilnius, the capital of the recently independent Lithuania.

The train departed at sunset, although it was nearly midnight. The others in my compartment were a family of Azeris, from Baku, who had with them vodka, chicken, bread, sausage, and pickles. I added Swiss chocolates to the picnic, and until 2:00 A.M. we communicated with sign language, pictures, and vodka shots as the train rocked through a flat landscape of scrub pine.

The train arrived in Vilnius the next morning at 10:30 A.M., although it was hard for me to read the signs to be sure I was getting off at the correct station. With only a day in the city, I decided to take a tour. But as I was the only one asking to see Vilnius that day, I was sent off with a car and driver, and also a guide, a young woman in her twenties who spoke impeccable English.

We spent most of our time walking the narrow lanes of the old city and at the university, which is one of the oldest in Europe. Loreta Raulinaityte, my guide, had studied English literature there, and she knew the writings of the Brontës, Edith Wharton, and Thomas Hardy as well as she knew the scenic walks of old Vilnius.

The wars of modern Europe spared the city, which is remarkably free also of Stalinist city planning. Nevertheless, Vilnius is a ghost town. Even today it should look like a Roman Vishniac photograph of the Jewish pale. But the Jews of Vilna, as the Polish city was then called, disappeared into the Holocaust, and where now they should be hanging wash or selling goods, there are empty cobblestone streets and vacant townhouses that suggest a stage set for a tragedy that has already been filmed, screened, and forgotten.

Over lunch in the old town, Loreta told me about the rebellion, in January 1991, that challenged Soviet rule. It was the first open defiance of Russian hegemony, and on January 12 and 13, the citizens of Vilnius, among them my guide, stood vigil in front of the parliament and the television tower to defend the emerging democracy.

Russian troops responded by storming the television tower, killing



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thirteen Lithuanians, and occupying Vilnius until August of that year, when the failed coup against Gorbachev dissolved the Soviet empire. I asked Loreta what she did when she saw Russian armored personnel carriers move in on the parliament, where she was standing. "We started praying," she said. But they never flinched.

As we walked after lunch, we passed a truck belonging to the British Broadcasting Corporation that was parked near a central square. Inside were continuous showings of the BBC's World Service, and for a glimpse of the news, Lithuanians had formed a long line, as if for bread. Loreta explained that newspapers and English books were still hard to find in Lithuania. When I asked her what I could send, she requested a novel by Margaret Drabble, a dictionary of legal terms, and a textbook on international law—a reading list that, to my mind, sums up what the countries of the former Soviet Union need most to emerge from Lenin's tomb.

I was dropped at the airport for the flight back to Switzerland, and while I had no trouble confirming my seat reservation, I was stopped at immigration for not having a visa for Lithuania. No one on the train had stamped me out of Russia or into Lithuania, and the immigration officer wanted to know why. My blood ran cold. I had images of being taken away to another jail hotel, of meeting my tormentor in the brown suit who would want to know why I was now breaking the laws of Lithuania. For a few moments the officer and I stared at each other, as if he were the truant officer and I had escaped from school.

"You know," he said, waving my passport as if it were a teacher's ruler, "this is not good." But then he smiled, opened the passport, stamped "Lietuvos Respublika, Vilnius" on a blank page, and told me a day wasn't enough time to see Lithuania.



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# Science in Trouble

FREEMAN J. DYSON

TROUBLE COMES TO SCIENCE on three levels: personal, local, and global. The personal behavior of scientists is taken very seriously by our official guardians, the National Academy of Sciences and the departments of government concerned with the funding of science. At a meeting of scientists at Princeton some years ago, various functionaries from the Washington office of the National Academy of Sciences spoke. One of them talked like a Grand Inquisitor. She said her mission was to stamp out Deviant Science. I disagreed sharply with her. I do not find it shocking that some of our best scientists turn out to be cheats or crooks. Creative people in any walk of life have a tendency to be odd. To stamp out Deviant Science means to drive out odd people from our profession. Scientists should be subject to the same laws as other citizens so far as criminal behavior is concerned. It is a fundamental mistake to pretend that scientists are more virtuous than other people or to attempt the enforcement of virtue by means of an Academy inquisition.

I was recently invited by the Academy to serve on a committee to investigate the alleged violation of ethical standards by the biologist Robert Gallo. The president of the Academy informed me that service on this committee was an important public duty. Nevertheless, I declined. I did not wish to be a part of any such inquisition. Robert Gallo is a scientific entrepreneur who has made enormous contributions to the understanding of the AIDS virus. The position of Robert Gallo in the world of biology is like the position that Robert Oppenheimer occupied forty years ago in the world of physics. The two Roberts were both successful scientific empire builders. They both ran big organizations with brilliant flair and with some disregard for bureaucratic rules. They were both accused of deviousness and occasional dishonesty. In the case of Oppenheimer, these accusations were made the basis of the Security Hearing of 1954, which

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resulted in his condemnation and dismissal from government service. It is now generally agreed that the proceedings against Oppenheimer were unwise and unfair and did serious damage to American science. The proceedings against Gallo have the same vindictive character as the proceedings against Oppenheimer. Our National Academy of Sciences is now lending its name to such proceedings in the same way as the Atomic Energy Commission did in 1954. In both cases, a great man is being harassed and punished for offenses that are, in comparison with his achievements and his services to society, trivial.

The mathematician Chandler Davis wrote a historical article with the title "The Purge," published by the American Mathematical Society in 1988 in the book *A Century of Mathematics in America*, which celebrated the hundredth birthday of the society. The article tells a shameful story of discrimination and persecution inflicted by American academic institutions upon mathematicians who had been accused of disloyalty in the congressional inquisitions of the McCarthy era. The discrimination and persecution continued for several decades. Some of these mathematicians had been trapped by the inquisitors into making false statements about their associations with people who may or may not have been Communists. Others, like Chandler Davis himself, had stoutly refused to make any statements that would incriminate their friends and were then punished for their silence. Davis was indicted and convicted for contempt of Congress. The Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, to its eternal credit, gave Davis a position as a member in 1957 when he was a convicted felon. He worked at the Institute while his conviction was under appeal. The National Science Foundation, to its eternal credit, gave him financial support. After his term as a member of the Institute was over, his appeal was dismissed and he went to jail for six months. After he came out of jail, he was unable to find a job as a mathematician anywhere in the United States. He moved to Canada and became a professor of mathematics at the University of Toronto. Others were not so fortunate or so resilient. The physicists David Bohm and Frank Oppenheimer were driven out of academic life in this country, and their careers were permanently disrupted.

When one looks at these stories with the benefit of hindsight, one sees that the congressional inquisition was not the worst evil. Politicians generally have short memories. After the physicist Norman Ramsey appeared before the McCarthy committee to defend his friend Wendell Furry who was under attack, Ramsey went home and was surprised to receive a friendly telephone call from Senator McCarthy offering him a job on the committee staff. The inquisitors were mainly interested in attracting public attention to themselves.



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They were not so much interested in permanently wrecking scientific careers. It would not have been so bad if the result of their inquisitions had been only to send a few people to jail for six months or a year. A year in jail is no joke, but it is not usually fatal. The congressional inquisitors were the lesser evil. The greater evil was the American academic establishment, the university administrators and faculty committees who continued, through venality or cowardice, to discriminate against the inquisitors' victims long after the inquisition was over. The lasting and permanent damage was done by us, by the scientific community to which we belong, not by Senator McCarthy and his bully-boy legal counsel.

This history of the long-range effects of the spy mania of the 1950s is highly relevant to the present-day hysteria over the alleged misdeeds of the biologists Robert Gallo and David Baltimore. Again we have an inquisitive congressman, John Dingell, who is using his legitimate powers to uncover scandals in the scientific community. He is not a particularly evil character. He is only doing his job as a politician with rather more zeal than the situation requires. There is no reason why we should be afraid of him. If he can uncover some criminal activity with evidence strong enough to send the perpetrator to jail, then the perpetrator should go to jail after being properly tried and sentenced, as Chandler Davis went to jail. We should not contest Congressman Dingell's right to uncover evidence that may send some of our colleagues to jail. That is his legitimate business. But we should strongly oppose the efforts of our National Academy and other academic institutions to be more zealous than Dingell in the extirpation of deviant science. The forces now driving academic institutions to join the bandwagon of moral rectitude are the same forces that drove academic institutions in the 1950s to join the bandwagon of spy mania. These forces are, now as then, cowardice and venality. If we bravely stand up for our colleagues who are under attack, we risk being attacked ourselves, and, even worse, we risk being deprived of funds on which we have come to rely. Our National Academy of Sciences is not immune to such pressures. Political courage is a rare virtue, not often to be found in national academies.

David Baltimore is under attack because he put his loyalty to his friend and collaborator Tereza Imanishi-Kari above his loyalty to the rules of scientific rectitude. Chandler Davis went to jail because he put his loyalty to his left-wing friends above his loyalty to the rules of national security. The nature of the ethical dilemma was the same in both cases. Should one sacrifice friends on the altar of general principles? Both Davis and Baltimore showed great courage in their refusal to sacrifice their friends, knowing that the personal cost to



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themselves would be heavy and that they could expect no support from the American scientific community.

The world of science is like the world of music. Professional music is as full of political intrigue and personal rivalry as professional science. Musical and scientific entrepreneurs are equally obsessed with money and power. The average musician is, like the average scientist, pursuing a difficult vocation under difficult circumstances, sustained by a network of intense professional friendships. Why should we expect scientists to be more virtuous than musicians? Why are we more tolerant of waywardness in musicians than in scientists? It happens that I was intimately exposed to the world of professional music when I was a child in England. My father was at the center of the musical life of London, and many of the leading musical figures of Europe came by. I said once to my father, "How does it happen that among all these musicians you are the only one who is sane?" He said, "Thank God I am not Beethoven." Many of the visiting celebrities had strange personal habits and violent tempers. Zoltán Kodály, the leading composer of Hungary, was always on friendly terms with the Hungarian government, whether the government happened to be Fascist or Communist. Richard Strauss was on friendly terms with Hitler. My father did not hold this against them. He was happy that they all kept on coming to London, to keep the international world of music alive as long as possible in those days of turmoil and war. I remember an evening when Kodály lay silent on the sofa in our living room, his rich brown shoulder-length hair surrounding his handsome head like a halo, a clinical thermometer clutched tightly in his hand. Every few minutes, he put the thermometer in his mouth, pulled it out and looked at it, and said in a deep sepulchral tone, "It is death." The next day, he was back on the podium conducting the British premiere of his *Galanta Dances*. That was the world of professional music as I saw it. Why should we expect the world of professional science to be less weird? Why should we impoverish our science by excluding those controversial spirits and dubious characters that have so greatly enriched our music?

Another way that trouble comes to science is on the local level, when people are worried about possible dangers to public health caused by scientific experiments. Public concern about these dangers became acute in the early 1970s after recombinant DNA was discovered and the microbiologist Maxine Singer called attention to possible hazards resulting from its use. Recombinant DNA made it possible in principle to construct new living creatures with genetic characteristics chosen according to the whim of the experimenter. In



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1974 a group of leading microbiologists declared a voluntary moratorium, promising not to begin recombinant DNA experiments until the hazards had been carefully examined and a reasonable set of rules to govern such experiments had been publicly accepted. They called for an international conference which was held at Asilomar in 1975 to define the boundaries between safe and dangerous experiments. The National Institutes of Health established rules in 1976 under which experiments could go forward with various levels of containment corresponding to various degrees of viciousness of the creatures under investigation. Similar rules were established by the medical authorities in other countries. This system of regulation of experiments has worked well for the last sixteen years. Scientific progress has been hampered only to a minor extent, and no cases of public injury resulting from experiments have been reported.

Only in two places were the local political authorities unwilling to accept the standards of safety provided by nationally imposed rules. The two places where local authorities decided to take the law into their own hands were Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Princeton, New Jersey. Mayor Vellucci of Cambridge had been feuding for many years with Harvard University and happily seized this new opportunity to make trouble. Here is a letter he wrote to the president of the National Academy of Sciences.

Dear Mr. Handler,

As Mayor of the City of Cambridge, I would like to respectfully make a request of you. In today's edition of the Boston Herald American, a Hearst Publication, there are two reports which concern me greatly. In Dover, Massachusetts, a "strange, orange-eyed creature" was sighted, and in Hollis, New Hampshire, a man and his two sons were confronted by a "hairy nine foot creature." I would respectfully ask that your prestigious institution investigate these findings. I would hope as well that you might check to see whether or not these "strange creatures," should they in fact exist, are in any way connected to recombinant DNA experiments taking place in the New England area. Thanking you in advance for your cooperation in this matter, I remain

Very truly yours,
Alfred E. Vellucci

The citizens of Princeton expressed similar worries in more sophisticated language. Mayor Vellucci represented correctly the essence of the problem confronting the biologists both in Cambridge and in Princeton. The problem was distrust. The biologists had somehow to dispel the deep distrust that their activities aroused in the hearts of their neighbors. In both places the municipal authorities appointed a



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citizens' committee composed of local residents, to study the hazards and to advise the authorities as to whether and under what conditions recombinant DNA experiments should be permitted in the town.

The citizens' committee in Princeton consisted of eleven people, of which I was one. We were supposed to represent all the important segments of Princeton except for the university. We were not supposed to be experts. The way we were chosen by the mayor was rather like the way Bill Clinton chose the members of his cabinet. We were six men and five women, nine white and two black, two medical doctors, three writers, three scientists, one schoolteacher, one Presbyterian minister, and one retired housekeeper. Representatives of the university were invited to our meetings but had no voice in our decisions. We started in January 1977 and worked hard for four months, hearing testimony and educating ourselves about the practical details of disease control, bacterial epidemiology, laboratory design, and experimental protocol. Our meetings were open to the public. Many citizens came to express their views, and many more came to listen and to learn. On the whole, the committee did an excellent job in providing a neutral ground on which the university biologists and the distrustful citizens could meet and talk and get to know each other and understand each others' concerns. This was the main positive result of our work. We kept the dispute between town and university from descending to the level of legal confrontation. Nobody on either side threatened to sue. We did not bring in lawyers to intensify the existing level of distrust. As a result of our patient work of education, it gradually became obvious to both sides that some political compromise based upon mutual respect could be achieved.

We succeeded in educating ourselves and the public, but we failed to do what the municipal authorities had asked us to do. They asked us to write a report with recommendations for action. When we finished our deliberations in May 1977, we gave them not one report but two, a majority report signed by eight of us and a minority report signed by three. The majority recommended that experiments be permitted to go forward with conditions slightly stricter than the National Institutes of Health required. The minority recommended that experiments requiring a specially built laboratory under the NIH rules be forbidden. According to the minority view, the Borough of Princeton should enforce the local prohibition of dangerous experiments by denying a building permit for the required laboratory. These divided voices were not what the Princeton Borough Council wanted to hear. Since we were unable to produce a unanimous recommendation, the council was compelled to examine the issues in detail before coming to a decision. Nine months later, the council



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decided by a five-to-one vote to follow the recommendations of our majority report. By that time the public concern about recombinant DNA had subsided. The university was able to go ahead with building a laboratory and using it for experiments. So far as Princeton was concerned, the fuss was over.

These events in Princeton happened fifteen years ago. Since that time, the battleground for disputes about recombinant DNA has moved from laboratories to field experiments. It is difficult to argue, after fifteen years of experience without a single casualty attributable to recombinant DNA, that the laboratory experiments are endangering public health. But the practical applications of recombinant DNA in medicine and agriculture require testing in the field. If recombinant DNA is to be used on an industrial scale to improve crop plants and to suppress agricultural pests, the genetically engineered creatures must be produced in large quantities and let loose in the open air. Proposals to carry out field tests have met bitter opposition, especially in California. Jeremy Rifkin, an environmental activist skilled in legal maneuvers, harasses the proposers of field experiments with lawsuits and brings their experiments to a halt. In the face of long delays and heavy costs, manufacturers are effectively deterred from pursuing experiments. The peaceful coexistence between science and society achieved by the Asilomar conference of microbiologists in 1975 is in danger of breaking down. The level of distrust between genetic engineers and ordinary citizens is rising. This is not only an American problem. The voices of distrust in Germany and several other European countries are even more strident than they are in California. All over the world, as genetic engineering comes closer to practical application, it runs into a barrier of public distrust. The little storm-in-a-teacup that we experienced in Princeton in 1977 may provide some useful guidance to the world community of scientists in navigating the larger storm that is now brewing. Our citizens' committee learned two lessons that were useful to Princeton in 1977 and may be useful to the big world today.

The first lesson that we learned was the importance of listening. The only effective way to dissipate distrust is for the people who are distrusted to sit down and listen to what their critics have to say. We saw this happen during our long evenings in Princeton Borough Hall. The critics were not won over by university experts giving lectures about the technical safety of biological containment. The critics were won over by personal contact with Edward Cox and Sheldon Judson, the university representatives who listened to the critics' remarks and patiently answered their questions. A citizens' committee is an effective device for allaying distrust because its main business is listening.



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The National Academy of Sciences is an ineffective device because it only speaks and never listens, telling ordinary citizens in an authoritarian voice what is good for them, hiding its internal doubts and disagreements behind a mask of official consensus. So that is the first lesson that Princeton has to offer to the world. Listen more and talk less. Reach out to the public through citizens' committees and not through national academies.

The second lesson that our citizens' committee learned is more complicated. It arises from our ultimate failure to agree. We learned that sincere and well-informed people may have fundamentally divergent views about the ethics of science. The official charge to our committee was narrowly concentrated on issues of public health. We were told to "study to what extent, if any, research on recombinant DNA within the Borough and Township of Princeton might be harmful to the health, welfare and safety of its citizens." The eight of us who signed the majority report wished to interpret our charge narrowly. We considered that our task was to listen to citizens who were afraid of infection by bugs escaping from laboratories and to evaluate whether their fears were justified. The two medical doctors on our committee told the citizens in no uncertain terms that their fears were exaggerated. The doctors told them that if they wanted to find serious biohazards in Princeton the place to look was not the university but the Princeton hospital, that the daily procedures in the clinical laboratories of any working hospital were far more risky and far less under control than anything contemplated by the university. After listening to the doctors describing the bacterial fauna at large in the hospital, it was difficult to regard the small menagerie of creatures in the university laboratories as uniquely threatening. Our majority of eight agreed with the doctors that the plans of the university presented no serious danger to public health and that our final report should confine itself to stating this conclusion. However, we learned in long and friendly discussions that our minority of three, Wallace Alston the Presbyterian minister, Susanna Waterman the writer, and Emma Epps the retired housekeeper, saw our task differently. The three were unwilling to stay within the narrow interpretation of our charge. Emma Epps had been for many years the housekeeper in the home of the great art historian Erwin Panofsky and had helped to educate the Panofsky twins, who both became famous scientists. Her feelings toward scholarship and science were warm, but her feelings toward Princeton University were bitter. Growing up in Princeton in the days when it was a segregated town, she had had to go south for her college education. After she returned and became a leader of the Princeton black community, she had fought and lost many battles



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against the university. She was not inclined to give the university the benefit of any doubt.

The point of view of our minority was expressed most clearly in a written statement by Susanna Waterman. "We confronted to the best of our abilities the larger ethical, moral and philosophical questions that cannot be ignored, and are of profound importance. 1. Is it possible to separate ethical problems involved in experiment from those involved in application? 2. Is it possible to separate the creation of new forms of plant and microbial life from the creation of new kinds of human beings? 3. Assuming that the genetic manipulation of human beings becomes a practical possibility, should the ethic of the brotherhood of man, or the ethic of the right of the individual to be different, prevail? 4. Does the commercial exploitation of recombinant DNA research introduce different ethical problems from the commercial exploitation of other biological processes? 5. Does the insertion of genes from higher organisms into lower organisms in itself constitute a dangerous breach of evolutionary barriers? 6. Do we have the right to interfere with the processes of natural evolution when we cannot know what it will lead to?" She concludes by saying, "In so far as a society can be measured not by the knowledge that it acquires, but by the values it brings to bear on that knowledge, so this Committee's recommendations reflect not the information that we gathered, but the perceptions and values we brought to bear upon it."

Susanna Waterman's philosophical discourse was intensely irritating to our busy medical doctors, who wanted to get the work of the committee finished so that they could go back to saving lives in the real world. But I agreed with Susanna that the committee had a right and a duty to go beyond its charter and examine the deeper long-range problems that biological knowledge raises. After the easy questions of public health have been answered, the difficult long-range questions remain. Our committee was correctly responding to the anxieties of the public when it devoted a part of its time to the long-range questions. The public is not only concerned about present dangers. The opposition to biological experiments comes at least as much from people who share the worries articulated by Susanna Waterman. If trust between scientists and the public is to be restored, the scientific community must be willing to listen to worried citizens and not only to medical doctors. Our committee was successful in creating trust because we listened to Susanna's philosophical questions and showed her that we shared her doubts.

The second lesson that our committee's experience offers to the larger world is that the good and the evil faces of science should be openly acknowledged and should not be hidden. Science by its nature



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is unpredictable and therefore risky. Those who speak for the scientific profession should not pretend that the practical consequences of research are either calculable or controllable. The public discussion of science should begin with the recognition that supporters and opponents of research have philosophical beliefs that may be incompatible but are both deserving of respect. We should let the public know that we respect Susanna Waterman and those who share her critical view of science, that we do not claim to have satisfactory answers to her questions, and that the scientific enterprise will always need critical spirits like hers to warn us when we are heading for disaster.

The third way trouble comes to science is on the global level. Susanna Waterman asked questions about the long-range effects of recombinant DNA on human society. Similar questions are being asked about the effects of science in general on the lives of ordinary people. These questions were anticipated almost a hundred years ago by the poet Yeats. Long before recombinant DNA was dreamed of, Yeats wrote a poem with the title "The Happy Townland":

> There's many a strong farmer
> Whose heart would break in two,
> If he could see the townland
> That we are riding to;
> Boughs have their fruit and blossom
> At all times of the year;
> Rivers are running over
> With red beer and brown beer.
> An old man plays the bagpipes
> In a golden and silver wood;
> Queens, their eyes blue like the ice,
> Are dancing in a crowd.

This little poem presents a rosy picture of the way science was to transform society in the twentieth century, the old farmer lamenting the passing of the old way of life, the young townspeople heedlessly enjoying the blessings of technology. Yeats understood that science produces social change and that some people will be winners and others will be losers. In Yeats's vision of the future, as in the past history of technological change, the losers were mostly old and the winners mostly young. At the beginning of this century when Yeats was writing, old people were building and driving horse-drawn carriages while young people were learning how to build and drive automobiles. So long as the winners are young and the losers are old, the process of technological change is psychologically tolerable. It is seen



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as part of the normal replacement of one generation by the next. Even if the old farmer is suffering hardship and poverty, he is willing to accept his fate if he knows that his children will be better off than he is. Throughout history, the social upheavals caused by scientific progress have usually been accepted as benign, because they opened new opportunities to the young and only closed opportunities to the old who were soon to disappear as an inevitable consequence of human mortality.

The normal pattern of social change, with young winners and old losers, was abruptly broken by the First World War. Especially in England where I grew up in the 1930s, the First World War produced a profound public hostility toward science. The greatest horror of the war was not the fact that technology killed millions of people, but the fact that the victims were young while the generals and politicians who organized the technological carnage were old. For the first time, science caused a social upheaval in which the winners were old and the losers young. This inversion of the natural order of winners and losers caused a severe shock to the whole society. It caused a loss of confidence in science and a passionate hatred of technology among many young people of my generation. The mathematician G. H. Hardy spoke for us when he wrote in *A Mathematician's Apology*: "A science is said to be useful if its development tends to accentuate the existing inequalities in the distribution of wealth, or more directly promotes the destruction of human life." The tragedies of the Second World War did not arouse such a revulsion against science, because the sacrifices of the second war were shared more equitably between old and young, between civilians and soldiers.

The war in Vietnam caused a shock to American society in the 1960s similar to the shock caused by the First World War in England, with a similar loss of respect for science among the young people who felt themselves to be the losers. The traumas of the Vietnam War are now slowly healing, both here and in Vietnam. We cannot any longer blame the Vietnam War for our persistent social problems. There is now a far more ominous pattern of social change, which has nothing to do with past or future wars. During the 1980s we saw for the first time a peaceful science and a non-military technology driving a revolution in which the winners were old and the losers young. Instead of Yeats's happy townland of queens dancing in a crowd, we see a townland of poverty and misery with social outcasts roaming the streets, people homeless and disproportionately impoverished. A large fraction of the losers are now young mothers and children, people who were better cared for in the old days when our technologies were less advanced. This state of affairs is ethically intolerable,



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and if we scientists are honest, we must accept a big share of responsibility for allowing it to happen. This is the central ethical imperative that science now has to face. We may say, as Kaiser Wilhelm said at the end of World War I, "Ich hab' es nie gewollt" [I never wanted it to happen], but history will not excuse us for allowing it to happen, just as history has not excused Kaiser Wilhelm.

Why put responsibility upon the scientific community for the decline of urban society and public morality in the United States? Of course we are not alone responsible. But we are more responsible than most of us are willing to admit. We are responsible for the heavy preponderance of toys for the rich over necessities for the poor in the output of our laboratories. We have allowed government and university laboratories to become a welfare program for the middle class while the technical products of our discoveries take away jobs from the poor. We have helped to bring about a widening split between the technically competent and computer-owning rich and the computerless and technically illiterate poor. We have helped to bring into existence a post-industrial society that offers no legitimate means of subsistence to uneducated youth. And at the same time we have subsidized university tuition for children of professors so that the academic profession is gradually converting itself into a hereditary caste. I recently listened to a distinguished academic computer scientist who told us joyfully how electronic data bases piped into homes through fiber-optic cables are about to put newspapers out of business. He did not care what this triumph of technological progress would do to the poor citizen who cannot afford fiber optics and would still like to read a newspaper. I have heard similar boasting from medical scientists about the achievements of high-tech medical specialties that are putting the old-fashioned family doctor out of business. We all know what these triumphs of technology are doing to the poor citizen who cannot afford a visit to a high-tech hospital and would still like to see a doctor.

This indictment of the scientific establishment has not yet been hurled at us from the rooftops by an enraged public. Attacks against science are likely to become more bitter and more widespread in the future, as long as the economic inequities in our society remain sharp and science continues to be predominantly engaged in building toys for the rich. To forestall such attacks, whether or not we feel guilt for the sins of society, the scientific community should invest heavily in projects that benefit all segments of our population. Such projects are not hard to find, and many individual scientists are working on them, working long hours for meager pay. Scientists can participate in the education of children and teachers in poor neighborhoods, or in the



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staffing of accessible public-health clinics. The physicist Leon Lederman has organized a continuing involvement of scientists from the national Fermi laboratory in the public schools of Chicago. Such efforts are admirable, but they are very far from being adequate for the size of the problem. What is needed is a major commitment of scientific resources to the development of new technology that will bring our derelict cities and derelict children back to life. If our profession does not put its heart into such a commitment, then we shall deserve the passionate hatred that we shall sooner or later encounter.

Technology has not only done harm to poor people in our own American society; one can draw up an equally damning indictment against scientists for our contributions to the widening split between rich and poor on an international scale, to the worldwide spread of a technology that pauperizes nations and enriches elites. Many individual scientists, here and overseas, have dedicated their lives to repairing the damage that technology has done to poor countries. In the world as a whole, just as in the United States, a far greater commitment of scientific resources is needed in order to create a technology that is friendly to ordinary people wherever they happen to live.

One scientist has told us what it means to carry through an ambitious program of research aimed directly at the relief of human suffering. She has had to fight long battles on many levels—intellectual, technical, financial, and personal. She publishes her writings under the name Anna Brito. She is a Portuguese immunologist and poet who worked in a New York hospital studying the biochemistry of leukemia; she wrote letters to a friend describing her experiences. Here is an extract from one of her letters, written to her friend June Goodfield and published in June Goodfield's book, *An Imagined World.* "I am so tired of so much emotion that I can hardly gather the strength to write. But I must tell you that the little boy, Jesus, with acute T-cell leukemia and iron spots in his red cells, has an iron level in his blood serum of 456 when the normal range is between 48 and 193. I must therefore tell you that from little mice we have traveled all the way to where it matters, to little boys. From little experimental models made of history and past ideas, we have traveled all the way to the beginning of dawn, where from a dark mass the day begins to get shape and promise. And it is a cold hour. And that is what makes it different from love. For love is light and warmth, and understanding is only light. Only much later, and dissociated, is it warmth."



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# *After the Gypsies*

(*for Maria Teresa and Fiorella*)

ROBERT HOLLANDER

After the gypsies at the end of the journey
it all went easy, no more quick-eyed surprises.
The cities looked tired, the work was pleasant,
the sun shone a little, the churches were empty.
Still, that first night at a friend's house,
exhaustion almost giving way to sleep—but
they were back and a feeling of violation,
as though even this room at the edge
of the city were not impenetrably safe,
turning, turning in the unfamiliar bed
with the stunned awareness of their hands.
Finally the daylight and the next journey,
then friends and work and food and sleep,
all easy, all familiar, in the next tired place.
Now another city, children in the square:
"Teach us, teach us, we are not animals"
say the signs they raise. And now a lecture,
the room filled, amazingly, and many are students.
The speaker laughs at them, mocks their music,
their earphones in the museums, their grammar.
Teach them, teach them, do not insult them;
they are not animals unless you say so.

At last, the work done, the meals eaten, bag packed,
awaiting what will be there at the last station
before the airport. At that station they are worse,



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the friend said, many more and less dismissable.
So now they come back, the thin quick-faced woman
with wincing shrewd eyes, the girls, the poster
they hold out to distract and to hide the hands
that fly, like birds on a string, to pat,
flutter, enter, and take from any pocket.
"Noli me tangere," he shouts, one hand tug-
ging that huge suitcase, the other holding a book,
and with it he strikes and strikes and strikes
until the hands begin to flutter away
and the mother, her face for once real,
complains of him, this armed creature,
one of whose blows has struck her baby's head.
Even if he kept the contents of his pockets
they have stolen a part of his mind and from it
at any sudden moment there flies the sensation
of hands, small and quick, hands so very quick
they seem to have no owner, seem to be a part of him;
and then he knows he has not escaped the gypsies.

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# *Clerihews for the Clerisy II*

ROGER DU BÉARN

Pablo Utrillo
Once painted a willow,
Though it's not a tree you'd meet
On a Paris street.

G. F. W. Hegel
Invented the bagel.
He liked its peculiar density,
(His prose has the same propensity.)

Robert Burns
Was by turns
Lover, toper, poet.
The Scots sure let you know it.

Queen Dido
Holding back her dog Fido,
Said to the Trojan Aeneas:
"How nice of you to come and see us!"

Thomas Hobbes
Wrote: "Man robs,
Kills, and misbehaves ad libitum,
And only I know how to inhibit him."

Richard the Lion-Hearted,
Having departed
On a foolish crusade,
Couldn't get home without foreign aid.



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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart,
Intent on his notes art,
Lacked the temper commercial.
Not so Herr Köchel.

The Lord Elphinstone
Liked to see himself in stone.
His wife said: "He's best as a bust."
And he: "Nothing personal, I trust?"

Franz Boas
Took up fieldwork so as
Not to feel as futile
As people who don't know Kwakiutl.

John Dewey
Said: "Awful chewy,
This food for thought;
Do I masticate as I ought?"

The young Napoleon
Hadn't a simoleon
When he married Josephine.
Soon he hadn't a bean.

Marcel Proust
Preferred to roost
In a room lined with cork
To lounging at the Plaza in New York.

Jo(h)nson, Sam and Ben,
Are mixed up now and then.
The one wrote plays that rarely occur;
The other won fame by saying: "Sir!"



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Richard Strauss
Said: "I want a house
I can keep a babe in
And live a full Heldenleben."

James Anthony Froude
Was inclined to brood
When he urged his scheme of Oceana
And Gladstone replied: "Mañana."

Bruckner, the Viennese
Wrote many a pretty piece
And is held in high regard
As a New York Boulevard.

The famous Erasmus
Felt a clonic spasmus
When he heard Pope Clement VII
Say: "See you soon in heaven."

Jacques Casanova
Wrote over and over
That he seduced with zest unabating.
As for proofs—we're still waiting.

✪ ROGER DU BÉARN lives on the proceeds of his poetry and devotes the greater part of his time to finding rhymes to every proper name in the Columbia Encyclopedia.



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# Liberty

## "One Very Simple Principle"?

GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB

THE END OF THE COLD WAR has liberated us in more ways than we might have thought, liberated us from the tyranny of Communism and liberated us to reexamine the liberalism that is now triumphant. For more than half a century, confronted with the double threat of Nazism and Communism, the urgent problem facing us was: How can liberalism defend itself against totalitarianism? How can a society that is individualistic, pluralistic, pacific, devoted to private pleasures and domestic tranquility, prevail against an enemy that is collectivist, authoritarian, militaristic, mobilized for power and conquest? The defeat of Nazism and the collapse of the Soviet empire have conclusively proved that totalitarianism is not only oppressive and murderous; it is inefficient and fatally vulnerable.

Now we must confront another problem: not how liberalism can defend itself against totalitarianism, but how it can defend itself against itself—against its own weaknesses and excesses. In the Marxist jargon that has survived the death of the Marxist regimes, this is the new "problematic" of liberalism. How can a society that celebrates the virtues of liberty, individuality, variety, and tolerance sustain itself when those virtues, carried to extreme, threaten to subvert that liberal society and with it those very virtues?

The problem is not political but social, cultural, and moral; it is the ethos of liberalism that is at issue. Nor is it a new problem, for it goes back at least to the "classical liberalism," as we now call it, of the nineteenth century. The question of its genealogy is of more than academic interest. If the problem is inherent in classical liberalism, then it is not, as we might otherwise think, an aberration, peculiar to

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American democracy (American "exceptionalism"), or to "consumerist" capitalism, or to "post-industrial" society. These circumstances may exacerbate it, but they have not created it. And if this is so, then it is a matter of concern for all countries, the newly liberated as well as those with long-established liberal traditions.

The classic text of classical liberalism is, of course, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. It is also, by now, the classic text of a libertarian conservatism that regards itself as the true heir of classical liberalism. It is also the classic text of radicalism, at least of that school of radicalism that sees itself as carrying out the failed agenda of liberalism, the goal of a truly liberated liberalism. It is, in short, something of an icon of modernity, giving intellectual authority and legitimacy to several quite diverse modes of thought and behavior that dominate our society.

It also has the virtue of posing the issue in terms that are even more relevant today than they were in Mill's time. The first page of *On Liberty* informs us that the problem of liberty is no longer the problem of political liberty, of the struggle against a tyrannical regime imposing its arbitrary will on an oppressed populace. That problem, Mill assures us, has been solved by the establishment of popular government—at least in the more advanced countries and potentially in all others as they reach the level of a mature civilization. The problem now facing liberty is a new form of tyranny, a "social tyranny" exercised by the populace itself over the individual.

Mill's subject, then, as the opening sentence of *On Liberty* announces, is "Civil, or Social Liberty," whose province is nothing less than "the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual." The magnitude of the subject makes even more dramatic the "one very simple principle" that is at the heart of it. The passage describing that principle must be read in its entirety to appreciate how simple and also how absolute it is:

> The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier,



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> because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him must be calculated to produce evil to someone else. The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

The rhetoric is as simple and absolute as the principle itself. "One very simple principle" governs "absolutely" the relations of the individual and society; the "sole" end for which society may interfere with the liberty of an individual is self-protection; the "only" purpose for which power can be exercised over an individual is to prevent harm to others; the "only" part of the individual's conduct which is amenable to society is that which concerns others; in the part that concerns himself his independence is "absolute"; over his "own" body and mind he is "sovereign."

The paragraph that follows in Mill's essay seems to introduce further qualifications, but they are so minimal as to be of little practical effect. The principle is said to apply "only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties," and not to "those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage." But Mill interprets maturity literally to exclude only "children, or young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood"; and he says that the requisite stage of civilization has "long since [been] reached in all nations with whom we need here concern ourselves.

The rhetoric also points to a radical disjunction between the individual and society, indeed, an adversarial relationship, with the individual assigned all the positive, honorific attributes, and society the negative, pejorative ones. Thus the individual is endowed with "liberty" and "will"; his own "good" is entirely his own concern; his "independence" is absolute; he is "sovereign." Society, on the other hand, acts by way of "compulsion," "control," "force," "coercion," "interference," "tyranny." These negative qualities apply to society whether it is acting by means of "physical force in the form of legal penalties" or by the "moral coercion of public opinion." Even in the one circumstance where society can rightfully "interfere," its purpose is negative, to prevent "harm" or "evil" to others. It is explicitly enjoined from doing anything positive or desirable, from trying to further the individual's "good," or to make him "better" or "happier," or to do what it might think "wise" or "right."



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This "one very simple principle," Mill goes on to say, governs the realms of thought and speech, of action ("individuality"), and of combination (unions of individuals). This principle, not the political system, determines whether a country is free. "No society in which these liberties are not, on the whole, respected, is free, whatever may be its form of government; and none is completely free in which they do not exist absolute and unqualified."

As liberty of thought is absolute, so is liberty of speech, which is "inseparable" from the liberty of thought. Liberty of speech, moreover, is essential not only for its own sake but for the sake of truth, which requires absolute liberty for the utterance of unpopular and even demonstrably false opinions. Indeed false or unpopular opinions are so important to truth that they should be encouraged and disseminated by "devil's advocates" if necessary, for only by the "collision of adverse opinions" can the most certain of truths survive as live truth rather than "dead dogma."

Liberty of action—"individuality," as Mill more often speaks of it—is only one degree less absolute than that of thought and speech, for it is subject to the qualification of harm to others. Apart from that, it is inviolable because individuality is an absolute good in itself. Again, the rhetoric is revealing, individuality being associated with such positive words as independence, originality, spontaneity, genius, variety, diversity, experiment, choice, vigor, development, desire, feeling; and the threat to individuality with such negative words as conformity, mediocrity, restraint, the "yoke" of opinion, the "tyranny" of society, the "despotism" of custom. Some words that in normal usage are at best equivocal—impulse, peculiarity, eccentricity—have entirely favorable connotations as attributes of individuality; while others—law, tradition, custom, opinion, discipline, obedience—are unmistakably negative because they appear to restrict individuality. (One obvious and familiar negative term, "licence," appears nowhere in the book, perhaps because it suggests that there can be an excess of liberty.)

Just as the freedom of discussion is deemed good in itself, even when it results in the freedom of error, so individuality is good in itself even when an individual's "plan of life" or "experiments of living" are not notably good, may even be bad. In an earlier age, Mill explains, there was no advantage in individuals acting differently from the mass, "unless they acted not only differently but better." Today, however, the "mere example of non-conformity" or "eccentricity" is itself a virtue. And it is a virtue not only for "persons of genius" but for the "average man" who should be encouraged to defy custom and cultivate his individual mode of life, "not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode."



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This is the barest skeleton of Mill's extraordinary essay, but it is enough to suggest just how extraordinary it is. No discussion of *On Liberty* is complete without a tribute to its noble precursor, Milton's *Areopagitica.* Yet Mill does not mention that work in his essay, perhaps for the good reason that Milton's idea of liberty is not at all his own. Milton passionately defended freedom of the press; his tract was provoked by a parliamentary law requiring the licensing of printed works. But his argument did not extend to freedom of action. And even freedom of the press was restricted to a degree that Mill would have found intolerable, for it did not tolerate "popery, and open superstition," nor that which is "impious or evil absolutely either against faith or manners."

Nor does Mill cite as predecessors any of the other thinkers who might be expected to appear in a discussion of liberty: Spinoza, Locke, Montesquieu, Kant, Paine, Jefferson, Macaulay, Tocqueville—again, for good reason. (Locke, Kant, and Tocqueville are mentioned in passing but not in connection with liberty.) No one of them went so far as to propose anything like an absolute, or near-absolute, principle of liberty. Each of them limited or qualified liberty in a significant respect: liberty of speech, "but not out of anger, hatred, or a desire to introduce any change in the state on his own authority" (Spinoza); liberty, but only within the law and not for "opinions contrary to human society, or to those moral rules which are necessary to the preservation of civil society" (Locke); liberty, but not "unlimited," consisting "only in the power of doing what we ought to will, and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to will" (Montesquieu); liberty of speech, but not of action (Kant's "argue, but obey"); the liberty of the individual as against government, but not against "public opinion" or "society" (Jefferson and Paine); freedom, but under conditions of "order and moderation" (Macaulay); liberty, but not "without morality, nor morality without faith" (Tocqueville).

Yet it is *On Liberty,* in defiance of all precedent, which has set the terms of the debate for our time—for people who have not read the essay, who may not have heard of it, but who have absorbed its message by cultural osmosis, as it were. In his autobiography Mill described it as "a kind of philosophic textbook of a single truth," and gave it a provenance worthy of such a work. Perhaps unconsciously echoing Gibbon who was inspired to write his classic in the most classical of settings, as he sat "musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter," so Mill said that the idea of *On Liberty* first came to him while he was "mounting the steps of the Capitol." In a letter to his wife he



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explained that this was the most important subject that could occupy their few remaining years and that they must "cram into it as much as possible of what we wish not to leave unsaid." This was to be their legacy to humanity, and he was bold enough to predict that "it will be read and make a sensation." His prediction was borne out. When it was published four years later, after the death of his wife and as a memorial to her, it became an instant classic. With the benefit of hindsight, we might also say that it has proved to be even more influential than he had expected.

"Ideas," Lord Acton once wrote, "have a radiation and development, an ancestry and posterity of their own, in which men play the part of godfathers and godmothers more than that of legitimate parents." This has been the fate of *On Liberty*. Like all classics, it has taken on a life of its own, even while it retains the unmistakeable features of its paternity. *On Liberty* was radical enough in its own time, but it is, in a sense, still more radical in ours, because it seems to validate contemporary ideas about liberty which go well beyond those that Mill intended.

One of Mill's arguments, for example, for the absolute liberty of discussion is that such liberty is required for the sake of truth, for its emergence and continued vitality. About truth itself—that there is such a thing as truth, that it is finally knowable, and that it is of primary value to humanity—Mill had no doubt. He was not, in this sense, a relativist. But his doctrine lends itelf to relativism, even of an extreme kind. By making truth so dependent upon liberty—and upon the liberty of error as much as truth—it suggests that in the free marketplace of ideas, all opinions, true and false, are equal, equally valuable to society and equally worthy of promulgation. Mill himself meant only to say that society cannot presume to decide between truth and falsity, or even to lend its support to truth once that has been determined. But a later generation, deprived of the authority of society and impressed by the latitude and tolerance given to error, can so relativize and "problematize" truth as to deny the very idea of it.

Postmodernists are skeptical of any kind or degree of truth—not only absolute truth but contingent, partial, incremental truths. For them absolute liberty is not, as it was for Mill, the precondition of truth; rather it is the precondition of the liberation from truth itself, even from the "will to truth." In the jargon of the trade, truth is "totalizing," "hegemonic," "logocentric," "phallocentric," "autocratic," "tyrannical." Mill would assuredly have been distressed by this development. But his principle of absolute liberty, which "privileges" error



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together with truth, cannot be absolved entirely from responsibility for it.

As truth has been relativized—absolutely relativized, so to speak—so has morality. Again, Mill himself was not a relativist in moral affairs. He firmly believed that chastity is inherently superior to promiscuity, sobriety to drunkenness, decency to indecency, altruism to self-interest. But he also firmly believed that as truth is dependent upon the absolute liberty of discussion, so morality is dependent upon a maximum amount of individuality. And as society (still less the government) should not try to promote truth or suppress error, so there should be no legal or social sanctions to promote morality or discourage immorality.

It is not always appreciated how far *On Liberty* goes in denying not only to the law but to the informal mechanisms of society any control over the individual in regard to behavior that is properly regarded as immoral but that does not harm others. Social and moral sanctions, Mill insists, are as much encroachments on liberty as legal and physical ones. So long as they do not harm others, individuals must be free to act as they like, "without hindrance, either physical or moral." Acts are only a subject of "moral reprobation" when they involve a "breach of duty to others," but not if they are merely evidence of "folly, or want of personal dignity and self-respect." Social sanctions are called for when an individual's acts are harmful to others but do not legally violate their "constituted rights"; in this case the offender may be "justly punished by opinion, though not by law." But when a person's conduct affects only himself, the individual has "perfect freedom, legal and social," to do as he likes.

Even the qualification regarding harm reinforces the moral neutrality of society, for it is only in the case of "harm" to others, not for the "good" of others, that society can properly interfere with the freedom of the individual. And harm itself is further qualified by being limited to "direct," "definite," "perceptible" harm to others—not such indirect harm as might come from the example of misconduct or the temptation to vice, for that example "needs not affect them unless they like."

Mill's paean to individuality reflects an extraordinary optimism about human nature.

> To say that one person's desires and feelings are stronger and more various than those of another, is merely to say that he has more of the raw material of human nature, and is therefore capable, perhaps of more evil, but



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> certainly of more good. Strong impulses are but another name for energy. Energy may be turned to bad uses; but more good may always be made of an energetic nature, than of an indolent and impassive one. Those who have most natural feeling are always those whose cultivated feelings may be made the strongest. The same strong susceptibilities which make the personal impulses vivid and powerful, are also the source from whence are generated the most passionate love of virtue, and the sternest self-control. . . . The danger which threatens human nature is not the excess, but the deficiency, of personal impulses and preferences.

The argument rests on the transmutation of quantity into quality: the assumption that the larger the stock of "energy" or the "raw material of human nature," the greater the potentiality for good; that those who have "most natural feeling" also have the strongest "cultivated feelings"; that "strong susceptibilities" make for the "most passionate love of virtue"; that the danger comes not from an excess but from a deficiency of "personal impulses and preferences." This, as much as the principle of liberty, is the great novelty of Mill's argument. Most philosophers and theologians before him (and not only Calvinists, as he suggests) were wary of the raw material of human nature, finding in it at least as much potentiality for evil as for good, and therefore seeking ways of refining and controlling it. They located the source of virtue not in the individual's passions, desires, impulses, feelings, or susceptibilities, but in his conscience, will, reason, forethought, and self-restraint. As a further precaution they placed the individual within the protective custody, as it were, of family, law, religion, society, and civilization.

That *On Liberty* takes so optimistic a view of human nature is all the more remarkable in the light of Mill's other writings at that very time. In the essay "Nature," written only months before he started *On Liberty*, Mill argued that the spontaneous "impulses," "inclinations," and "instincts" of man are more likely to be bad than good and that they can be "tamed" only by an "eminently artificial discipline." As if in direct refutation of *On Liberty*, he described virtue as not natural but unnatural.

> The acquisition of virtue has in all ages been accounted a work of labour and difficulty, while the *descensus Averni* on the contrary is of proverbial facility; and it assuredly requires in most persons a greater conquest over a greater number of natural inclinations to become eminently virtuous than transcendently vicious.

"Transcendently vicious"—the words were tragically prophetic. For we have witnessed, in our own lifetimes, a *descensus Averni* that the Mill of *On Liberty* never dreamed of, and that even the "other Mill," as



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I have called him—the author of "Nature" and the many other writings at variance with *On Liberty*—could not have foreseen. Neither of them anticipated how "transcendently vicious" individuals could be, how energetic and ingenious in exploring the lowest depravities of human nature. They could not have anticipated it because both Mills lived in a world that took much for granted. Above all, what they took for granted was a civilization that would continue to impose upon individuals the "eminently artificial discipline" that was the moral corrective to human nature. They also took for granted that those virtues that had already been acquired by religion, tradition, law, and all the other resources of civilization would continue to be valued and exercised.

Nietzsche was more prescient than Mill, for he foresaw that once morality was divorced from religion, morality itself would become a "problem." Here too *On Liberty* is a portent of what was to come, for it prepared the way for that divorce by placing the individual in an adversarial relationship to both morality and religion, at least in their public roles. As a matter of private belief and practice, morality and religion are fully protected by the principle of liberty. But as soon as they impinge on the individual from the outside, in the form of legal sanctions or social pressures, they jeopardize liberty and contribute to the "social tyranny."

Mill concedes that religious and moral beliefs, once the source of bloody persecution, now produce only the "rags and remnants of persecution." But so long as such beliefs are supported by either legal or social sanctions, there is a real possibility of the revival of persecution—and if not actual persecution, then economic penalties that are as bad, for "men might as well be imprisoned, as excluded from the means of earning their bread." Indeed, this is a danger so long as people entertain strong opinions and feelings about the beliefs of others. And this is the unfortunate habit of mind which still prevails in England and which "makes this country not a place of mental freedom."

The distrust of strong opinions and feelings about religion and morality, the suspicion that they will always result in intolerance, bigotry, even persecution, would seem to be inconsistent with the celebration of individuality that pervades *On Liberty*. If individuality is commendable because it promotes strong desires, feelings, impulses, preferences, susceptibilities, it must also promote strong opinions, feelings, and beliefs about religion and morality. Mill cannot mean to suggest that individuality is well and good only so long as it avoids the subjects of religion and morality. In fact, he clearly has no objection



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to strong feelings, opinions, and beliefs directed *against* conventional religious and moral views. It is one of the purposes of individuality, he insists, to permit, even encourage, the expression of heterodoxy and nonconformity, to challenge religious establishments and dogmas and defy conventional moral professions and practices.

This apparent inconsistency reflects a barely concealed animus in *On Liberty* against religion, against a morality sanctioned by religion, and against a people still respectful of orthodox religion and conventional morality.

> What is boasted of at the present time as the revival of religion, is always, in narrow and uncultivated minds, at least as much the revival of bigotry; and where there is the strong permanent leaven of intolerance in the feelings of a people, which at all times abides in the middle classes of this country, it needs but little to provoke them into actively persecuting those whom they have never ceased to think proper objects of persecution.

The animus is all the more marked because so far from there being a "revival of bigotry," let alone persecution, in England at this time, there was a significant expansion of toleration, evident in the elimination of religious tests for office-holding, membership in Parliament, and admission to the universities. And so far from boasts of a "revival of religion," what was more often heard were complaints, even boasts, of the decline of religion. The census of 1851 proved what many had suspected, that there was a significant decrease of church attendance among both the working classes and the middle classes. There was also a conspicuous loss of religious conviction and an increasing sense of doubt and unbelief—this even before Darwin's *Origin of Species* (published shortly after *On Liberty*) made "the crisis of faith" a staple of discourse. One would not suspect, from Mill's essay, that religion was on the defensive, that there was a flourishing secularist and anti-religious movement, and that religious institutions, doctrines, and practices displayed all the variety and eccentricity that he so much valued in other aspects of social and intellectual life.

Implicit in Mill's discussion of religion is an idea that is central to his conception of liberalism as well as to our own: the distinction between public and private. Religious beliefs and activities are respected and protected by his principle of liberty so long as they are held and practiced privately, but they become threats to liberty as soon as they enter the public domain.

The distinction between public and private—between "other-regarding" and "self-regarding" acts, as Mill put it—is coterminous with the principle of liberty itself: it sets "the limits to the authority of



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society over the individual." Mill anticipated the objection that no act is ever entirely self-regarding, but he made a valiant effort to retain the distinction as the boundary between liberty and authority. At one point he even applied it to the question of manners. "There are many acts which, being directly injurious only to the agents themselves, ought not to be legally interdicted, but which, if done publicly, are a violation of good manners, and coming thus within the category of offences against others, may rightly be prohibited." He did not explain why a "violation of good manners," even in public, comes within the category of "offences against others" and is therefore illegal and punishable; nor whether such a violation of good manners requires (as he said elsewhere) evidence of direct and perceptible harm to others for it to warrant any social, let alone legal, prohibition.

The dividing line between public and private that Mill found it difficult to establish in theory is by now impossible to sustain in practice. The idea that a "violation of good manners" constitutes an "offence against others"—or, as he said elsewhere, an "offence against decency"—is itself archaic. Who is to say, it is now commonly asked, what is mannerly or unmannerly, decent or indecent, offensive or inoffensive? And what is the justification, in the absence of positive harm, for punishing offensive behavior, whether by legal or social sanctions? Mill himself, in discussing conduct that may be held to be personally "blamable" but not legally punishable because it affects only the agent, goes on to say, "Whatever it is permitted to do, it must be permitted to advise to do"—thus further blurring the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding acts. In the United States today, Mill's dictum has been amended to read: Whatever it is permitted to do, it must be permitted not only to advise others to do, but to do in public, and, moreover, to be paid by the public to so advise and so do. (This last argument is used to justify grants by the National Endowment for the Arts for performances on the stage which Mill would surely have prohibited as indecent and offensive.)

And if something is legal, is it not also moral? This is another distinction that we find difficult to sustain. Logically, of course, it is simple to distinguish between legality and morality. But in public affairs this distinction becomes as tenuous as that between private and public. If the law deems something to be legal, who is to say that it is immoral, except the individual who is free to speak and act for himself, and only himself? In a culture that has learned the lesson of *On Liberty* all too well—which resents the "tyranny" of society, custom, and public opinion, which is profoundly suspicious of any authority suggestive of a "moral police," which has erected the highest barriers



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between church and state so as to prevent any intimation of intolerance or coercion—what remains to give conviction and authority to a moral code that is distinct from, and perhaps in contradiction to, the legal code? It takes a great effort of will and intellect for the individual to decide for himself that something is immoral and to act on that belief, when the law and the institutions of the state deem it to be permissible and legal. It takes an even greater effort for parents to inculcate that belief in their children and persuade them to act on it, when public schools and official authorities contravene that belief and authorize behavior in violation of it.

You cannot legislate morality, it is often said—and Mill would have agreed. In fact, we have done just that, and liberals are properly proud of it. The considerable body of civil rights legislation in America, prohibiting racial, sexual, and other forms of discrimination, is thoroughly moral in intention and effect. It is inspired by moral principles; it prescribes and proscribes specific forms of moral behavior; and it has changed, to a significant degree, the moral beliefs, attitudes, and practices of the public. But if morality can be legislated, so can immorality. If liberals can take satisfaction in civil rights legislation, conservatives can be distressed by laws that condone sexual promiscuity, undermine "family values," and sanction "alternative life-styles" that they find immoral.

Legislation, to be sure, for conservatives as for liberals, is a last resort. And legislation itself relies, as Machiavelli reminds us, upon morals. "For as good manners cannot subsist without good laws, so those laws cannot be put into execution without good manners" ("manners" meaning "morals"). A corollary of this principle holds that if laws are not to be too intrusive, then society must assume some responsibility for shaping public morality. Just as legal sanctions obviate (to a large extent although not entirely) the use of force, so social sanctions obviate (again largely but not entirely) the use of legal sanctions.

Mill, however, and most liberals after him, have called into question any relationship between morality and legality. They do not believe that law must be grounded in or even be congruent with morality. Nor do they think it proper for morality, as expressed in social sanctions, to take the place of law, to do what it may be imprudent or impractical for the law to try to do. Instead, they proscribe social sanctions together with legal sanctions, stigmatizing both as the instruments of "social tyranny." In doing so, they unwittingly invite a worse tyranny, for legislation is then called upon to do what society might otherwise have done less obtrusively and more benignly.

One of the paradoxes of contemporary liberalism is the fact that it



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has become increasingly libertarian in moral affairs and at the same time increasingly *dirigiste* in economic affairs. In the moral realm, the individual is as close to being "sovereign"—or, we would now say, "autonomous"—as Mill could have desired. In the economic realm, however, the state exercises a degree of control at least the equal of the "social tyranny" that he so feared.

It is common to remark upon the great difference between nineteenth-century laissez-faire liberalism and twentieth-century social-welfare liberalism. The difference can be exaggerated: laissez-fairism was never as rigorous or systematic as was once thought; and the social-welfare state, with the demise of communism and the discrediting of socialism, is on the defensive if not in retreat. But with all due qualifications, the distinction between the two modes of liberalism is real and significant. No less real and significant is the disjunction within contemporary liberalism between the moral and the economic realms.

Here too the problem may be seen in embryo in *On Liberty*, although Mill made a determined, if not entirely persuasive, effort to minimize it. "Trade is a social act," he pronounced, therefore in principle falling within the province of society. Restraints on trade are "evil" insofar as they are restraints, but they are "wrong" only if they do not produce the desired results. Thus he thought it proper for the government to intervene to prevent the adulteration of products or assure the health and safety of workers in dangerous industries. But he rejected other restraints, such as temperance laws or restrictions on the sale of poisons, as a violation of liberty because they infringe on the liberty of the buyer rather than the producer.

The logical difficulties here are obvious. Why is it a violation of the principle of liberty to restrain the buyer but not the producer? Why should the sale of adulterated food be prohibited but not the sale of poison? If poisons require only proper labelling and a registry of sale but not medical prescription, why are these conditions not sufficient for adulterated products? Whatever the inconsistencies in Mill's argument, however, his purpose is clear: to limit the role of government, on grounds of expediency as well as liberty. His guiding rules for such limitations are equally clear. The government should not intervene "when the thing to be done is likely to be better done by individuals than by the government"; when individuals may not do it as well but "it is nevertheless desirable that it be done by them, rather than by the government, as a means to their own mental education"; and when government intervention would contribute to "the great evil of adding unnecessarily to its power." These conditions, Mill specifies, militate against government control of roads, railways, banks, large com-



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panies, universities, and the like, even if that would make for greater efficiency; indeed, the evil would be all the greater the more efficient the government might be. If the government were to exercise such control, no amount of freedom of the press or popular government would make England or any other country "free otherwise than in name."

Contemporary liberalism has taken Mill's dictum, "trade is a social act," and carried it to an extreme. Where Mill severely restricted the role of government in trade, thus minimizing the disparity between the moral and economic spheres, liberals today have conspicuously enlarged the gap by giving the government ever-increasing powers in economic affairs while endowing the individual with ever greater autonomy in moral affairs. A quarter of a century ago, the English jurist, Lord Devlin, characterized this as a combination of "physical paternalism and moral individualism." Today, a better formula would be "social paternalism and moral individualism," for the scope of government intervention has been extended from physical and material issues (health and safety, wages and hours, industry and the environment) to what are called "social" issues—racial integration, sexual equality, affirmative action, multicultural education, and any other policies deemed socially desirable. These goals may seem so compelling as to require a suspension of even the most absolute of liberties, the liberty of speech. Thus some liberals favor the prohibition of "hate speech"—speech that is derogatory of minorities—while adamantly defending the freedom of obscene, pornographic, or blasphemous speech. Indeed, obscene, pornographic, and blasphemous acts may be subsumed under the category of "symbolic speech" and thus enjoy all the liberty adhering to speech; while "hate speech" may be prosecuted as a violation of civil rights.

By now, this combination—and disjunction—of "paternalism" and "individualism" is so familiar and so embedded in law and custom that liberals are rarely troubled by it. It has become a fact of life, one of the many "cultural contradictions" of modernity that are no longer seen as "problems" because they have attained the status of "conditions." Yet it is a problem, because it raises fundamental questions about the principle of liberty that is at the heart of modern liberalism.

It is not only the contradictions themselves that are troublesome; it is the assumptions underlying them. Why is it proper for the government to prohibit insalubrious foods but not sadistic movies, to control the pollution of the environment but not of the culture, to prevent racial segregation but not moral degradation? There would seem to be a double standard of values and priorities at work here.

Does the increasing prevalence of paternalism mean that the eco-



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nomic, material, and social welfare of the people is deemed to be so much more important than their moral, cultural, and spiritual welfare as to justify the suspension of the principle of liberty in the former cases? Or that individuals are competent to understand and protect their moral, cultural, and spiritual interests but not their economic, material, and social interests? What conception of human nature is involved in this disjunction? What conception of the good society and the good life?

Again, Mill himself did not intend to advocate so complete a double standard, let alone so radical an inversion of values. He himself put a higher value and priority on moral goods than on material ones. This is why, in his work on political economy, he argued against an infinitely expanding economy and in favor of a "stationary" one that would limit competition and material acquisitiveness. It is also why, in *On Liberty*, he wanted to give the individual complete control over moral affairs, because only thus, he believed, would the individual develop his moral faculties—that is, his higher, better faculties.

The unintended implications of *On Liberty*, however, are very different. By leaving morality and the culture entirely within the province of the individual, by removing them from the public domain, by making it appear that they do not require any special attention or protection from either society or the state—by making them seem, in short, unproblematic—Mill unwittingly left the impression that they are less important, less urgent, than those economic, material, and social concerns that are deemed problematic and thus require the intervention of society and the state. This is not a logical consequence of his theory, but it is a plausible reading of it. One might reason, as Mill himself did, that the most important affairs are best left to the individual. But one could equally well conclude that if the government feels obliged to curtail liberty in order to protect the individual from tainted food but not from depraved literature, it is because tainted food is a more serious matter than depraved literature.

Mill would never have said, "No one has ever been corrupted by a book." He had too high a regard for books to be so dismissive of their moral—or immoral—effects. But he made it possible, and plausible, for others to take that view, to think that smog and insecticides are perilous enough to call for restrictions on liberty, but that pornography and obscenity are not; or that the Surgeon General can properly compel cigarette packages to carry a warning declaring them hazardous to health, but that the Attorney General cannot authorize a label on obscene recordings declaring them deleterious to the soul. As one wit has said, it is now permissible for a performer to masturbate on the stage, but only if he or she is paid the minimum wage.



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Liberalism has come a long way from *On Liberty*. But the roots of its current problems—its paradoxes and contradictions, excesses and limitations—lie in the principle of liberty enunciated in that work. Mill insisted that he was not dealing with liberty as a political doctrine. Yet it is obvious that the polity cannot be divorced from the ethos that sustains it, and that Mill's principle of liberty has political implications that mark a decisive break with an earlier liberal tradition.

That older tradition was appreciative of the ideas of self-interest, free will, and individual liberty, but tempered those ideas with a respect for the commonality of interests and wills and a liberty consonant with the common good. This was what was meant by "republican virtue" and "civic virtue," "social sympathy" and "social morality." By means of some such common denominator, liberty would be reconciled with morality and the individual with society and the polity. In enlightenment France, in Whig England, and in republican America, the message was the same: liberty, but not in excess and always in conjunction with virtue. Montesquieu expressed it best. "Virtue in a republic is a most simple thing: it is a love of the republic. . . . The natural place of virtue is near to liberty; but it is not nearer to excessive liberty than to servitude." Even the Founding Fathers, committed to the "new science of politics"—the theory that "opposite and rival interests" can best sustain republican government—did not denigrate the importance of virtue, either in leaders or in the people. "I go on this great republican principle," Madison said "that the people will have virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom. . . . To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea."

Tocqueville, writing about America but having in mind all those countries (notably his own) that would inevitably follow America along the path of democracy, was especially alert to the dangers of excessive individuality—"individualism," as he called it. That "novel expression," he explained, derives from a "novel idea": not selfishness (*egoisme*) in the old sense, which is "a passionate and exaggerated love of self," but "a mature and calm feeling" which disposes every individual to sever himself from society. Originating with democracy and thriving on equality, individualism saps the "virtues of public life" and eventually of private life as well. Its effect, however, might be mitigated by private associations mediating between the individual and the state, and by religion which, although not part of the American government, is "the first of their political institutions."

In dramatic contrast to Mill, Tocqueville saw religion not as the potential adversary of liberty but as its ally. Because religion has to be



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"believed without discussion," it removes from the individual intellect "many of the most important of human opinions." Thus it counteracts the intellectual solipsism of Americans, their habit of "fixing the standard of their judgment in themselves alone." It also serves as the bulwark of morality, which is the prerequisite of liberty. "Liberty requires religion as its companion in all its battles and its triumphs, as the cradle of its infancy and the divine source of its claims. It considers religion as the safeguard of morality, and morality as the best security of law and the surest pledge of the duration of freedom."

In Tocqueville and the Founding Fathers one finds a mode of liberalism that antedates *On Liberty* and that survives today as an alternative or corrective to it. One may also find it in Mill himself, the "other Mill," as I have called him, whose writings before as well as after *On Liberty* express views very different from the "one very simple principle" of that book. (Indeed, he criticized the idea of any single or simple principle applied to social affairs.)

It is this Mill who said that man should be encouraged to "*use* his own judgment" but not to "*trust* solely to his own judgment"; that there are "fundamental principles" that men are agreed in "holding sacred" and "*above* discussion"; that morality can be promoted by "education and opinion," "laws and social arrangements"; that the sign of an "advancing civilization" is the removal of man from a state of "savage independence" and "miserable individuality"; that "government exists for all purposes whatever that are for man's good: and that the highest and most important of these purposes is the improvement of man himself as a moral and intelligent being."

In criticizing the *philosophes*, Mill might have been anticipating the criticisms that could be made of *On Liberty*. In his essay on Coleridge (reprinted in part in his *Logic* and in its entirety in a volume of essays published the same year as *On Liberty*) he explained that the mistake of the *philosophes* was "unsettling everything which was still considered settled," uprooting whatever reverence people still felt for anything above them, and undermining their respect for "the limits which custom and prescription had set to the indulgence of each man's fancies or inclinations." Above all, they failed to see that the "social union" rests on a "host of civilizing and restraining influences" that curb man's "self-will and love of independence." Those influences derive from a system of education, beginning in infancy and continuing throughout life, which has as its "main and incessant ingredient" the inculcation of a "restraining discipline." The purpose of that discipline is to foster in every individual the habit and power of "subordinating his personal impulses and aims" to the ends of society



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and "controlling in himself all the feelings" liable to militate against those ends. Without such a discipline, no polity could sustain itself.

> Whenever and in proportion as the strictness of the restraining discipline was relaxed, the natural tendency of mankind to anarchy reasserted itself; the state became disorganized from within; mutual conflict for selfish ends neutralized the energies which were required to keep up the contest against natural causes of evil; and the nation, after a longer or briefer interval of progressive decline, became either the slave of a despotism, or the prey of a foreign invader.

One can only speculate on the reasons for the existence (sometimes the coexistence) of the "two Mills." But it is easier to explain why the Mill of *On Liberty* has come to overshadow the "other Mill." "One very simple principle" is always more seductive than a complicated, nuanced set of principles. And this particular principle is all the more appealing because it conforms to the image of the modern, liberated, autonomous, "authentic" individual.

It is also especially compelling at times of crisis, when liberty itself is in jeopardy. With the rise of Communism and Nazism, many liberals who might otherwise be inclined to a moderate, pluralistic, pragmatic view of liberty were persuaded that the only security against an absolutistic regime was an absolute principle of liberty. Anything less appeared incommensurate with the enormity of the evil. Totalitarianism, it was thought, could be effectively opposed only by an ideology as total and uncompromising as the enemy with which it did battle. Against absolute despotism the only adequate response seemed to be absolute liberty.

This was—and still is—the psychologcal basis of the "slippery slope" argument. Any deviation from absolute liberty is seen as a capitulation to tyranny, any restriction on pornography as a mortal blow to free speech. This is the argument used by liberals in support of government subsidies for such "art" as the photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine, the painting of Christ as a drug addict with a needle in his arm, or a sexual performance compared with which the old "strip tease" is positively puritanical. Yet the same liberals who advocate the largest freedom for artists (including the freedom to be subsidized) also tend to support, in the name of the same freedom, the strictest separation of church and state—with the curious result that the photograph of a crucifix immersed in urine can be exhibited in a public school, but a crucifix not immersed in urine cannot be exhibited.

Such absurdities point to a more serious problem: the tendency of absolute liberty to subvert the very liberty it seeks to preserve. By



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making particular liberties dependent on an absolute principle of liberty, by invalidating all those other principles—history, custom, law, interest, opinion, religion—which have traditionally served to support particular liberties, the absolute principle discredits these particular liberties together with the principles upon which they are based. So far from making liberty absolutely secure, the absolutistic doctrine may have the unwitting effect of depriving the most essential liberties of the security they enjoy under more traditional, modest auspices. And when that absolute principle proves inadequate to the exigencies of social life, it is abandoned absolutely, replaced not by a more moderate form of liberty but by an immoderate form of government control. This is the source of the disjunction between individualism and paternalism that is so conspicuous a feature of contemporary liberalism.

The absolute principle of liberty has another perverse effect. By that absolute standard, distinctions of degree become unimportant. Any liberty that falls short of it is seen as fatally flawed. And any society that is liberal in the traditional, non-absolutist sense is deemed to be as illiberal and illegitimate as a despotic society. This is the logic that informs the Marxist critique of liberalism as a form of "repressive tolerance," and the postmodernist critique of all societies, including the most liberal, as equally "tyrannical," "authoritarian," "hegemonic," "totalizing."

Those who have experienced the tyranny of totalitarianism can appreciate how very different that is from the "social tyranny" of liberal democracy. They can also appreciate the dangers of an absolute principle of liberty that gives little positive, legal, institutional support for those private and public virtues required of a liberal democracy. We have just such a testament from the leader of a newly liberated country who is himself not only an unexceptionable liberal but also a distinguished writer and intellectual. Vaclav Havel, the president of the Czech republic, reflects on the anomaly of a freedom liberated from morality itself.

> The return of freedom to a place that became morally unhinged has produced something that it clearly had to produce, and therefore something we might have expected. But it has turned out to be far more serious than anyone could have predicted: an enormous and blindingly visible explosion of every imaginable human vice. A wide range of questionable or at least ambivalent human tendencies, quietly encouraged over the years and, at the same time, quietly pressed to serve the daily operation of the totalitarian system, has suddenly been liberated, as it were, from its straitjacket and given free rein at last. The authoritarian regime imposed a certain order—if that is the right expression for it—on these vices (and in



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> doing so "legitimized" them, in a sense). This order has now been broken down, but a new order that would limit rather than exploit these vices, an order based on a freely accepted responsibility to and for the whole of society, has not yet been built, nor could it have been, for such an order takes years to develop and cultivate.
>
> And thus we are witnesses to a bizarre state of affairs: society has freed itself, true, but in some ways it behaves worse than when it was in chains.

Liberals have always known that absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. Like Havel, we are now discovering that absolute liberty also tends to corrupt absolutely. A liberty that is divorced from tradition and convention, from morality and religion, that makes the individual the sole repository and arbiter of all values and puts him in an adversarial relationship to society and the state—such a liberty is a grave peril to liberalism itself. For when that liberty is found wanting, when it violates the moral sense of the community or is incompatible with the legitimate demands of society, there is no moderating principle that can curb those demands or accommodate that moral sense, no resting place between the wild gyrations of libertarianism and paternalism.

Fortunately, we have another liberal tradition to repair to, that of Montesquieu and Madison, of Tocqueville and the other Mill. It is there that we may find a liberalism "properly understood" that will protect us from both the horrors of absolute power and the excesses of absolute liberty.



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# Modeling My Father

ALEXANDER NEMEROV

Like a good many poets, my dad was interested in ruins. The kind he preferred, though, were not monumental. You could bore him, most likely, taking him to some spot of sanctioned, official pathos: a battlefield, say, or a castle cracked and grown over with ivy. He sighed at historical markers—"On this spot Ethan Allen bivouacked. . . ." Give him some sprawling epic on television—something with Charlton Heston or Kirk Douglas swinging swords at invading godless sandaled enemies—and you'd likely see Dad slippered and snoozing. The clanking of these weapons was his lullaby. The rat-a-tat-tat of epic history, so far as I could tell, put him out like a light. No, he liked little ruins, everyday objects; he liked their remnant sense.

The decaying monument of Shelley's "Ozymandias" becomes, in Dad's "Ozymandias II," a used car—a '57 Karnak—its dilapidation lovingly described:

> . . . with half its chromium teeth
> Knocked down its throat and aerial ripped off,
> Side stitched with like bullets where the stripping's gone
> And rust like a fungus spreading on the fenders . . .

But even new objects had a poetical kind of ruined quality for Howard—as I have often called my father since I was a boy. I think of the woman's corsets in "I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee." The corsets remind the narrator that

> . . . all that whalebone came from whales.
> And all the whales lived in the sea,
> In calm beneath the troubled glass,
> Until the needle drew their blood.

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Indeed the whole scene described by the poem reflects this violent past. A mirror shows pictures "as troubled water" (just as the ocean, as "troubled glass," is mirror-like); a shadow is like "A giant crab readying to walk." The object is a ruin literally bound to its past, to a larger world: "the mirror's lashed to blood and foam."

But there is also something about such objects, in Howard's poems, that suggests the workings of poetry itself. To make a compact little structure out of the great big mysterious world, with all of its flukes—this, after all, is what the poet does. For me, one of Howard's poems is particularly clear about this. In "Models," a young boy's construction of balsa Spads and Fokkers prefigures (my dad would have said prefokkers) his construction, later in life, of his own past as an airman. "He made [the models] in miniature" just as, later, "memory . . . makes things miniature." The model is a metaphor for memory. But it is also just as surely a metaphor for poetry. The boy building models anticipates the man building poems. The model airplane on the cover of *War Stories*, the book in which "Models" appears, is a figure (a fokker) for a poem as well.

Howard's poems, like crafted objects, are also statements of loss. The corset is the ruin of the whale. The model, as a representation, is a token of the absence of what it copies. The poem, on the other hand, would seem to lead us to larger subjects: the whales and wars (Howard did not like his subjects medium-sized). Yet the poem does so—and this is how it is a kind of ruin—while keeping a sense of the elusiveness of the larger thing seen. For these things, even as they're evoked, remain ineffably distant and strange. They are under the sea, like the whales or like Middlemas and Prince, the two submerged airmen of Howard's early poem "For the Squadron": "Resting forever behind their / Four smashed and rusting guns." Or, like the mud turtle, disappearing at the end of the beautiful poem called "The Mud Turtle,"

> Bearing his hard and chambered hurt
> Down, down, down, beneath the water,
> Beneath the earth beneath. He takes
> A secret wound out of the world.

In the bombsight that's the final image of "The Air Force Museum at Dayton," the bombardier

> Saw towns as targets miniature and quaint,
> Townsfolk invisible that far below.



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In another poem, titled (invisibly enough) "The War in the Air," the dead recollected are " . . . the losers we left out there

In the air, in the empty air.

Likewise, "deeps invisible" are what Diane Arbus, the photographer and Dad's sister, falls into in "To D—, Dead by Her Own Hand."

The invisibility of the world in Howard's poetry is a sign for the unknown, the mysterious, the elusive point up to which the poet wants to lead and then, sighing a pleasurable despair, stop. This deliberate incompleteness relates to a simple fact: Howard had no time for essences. He distrusted them like he would have some big, holy-no-holds-barred baroque alterpiece. He had no time, I mean, for essential meanings, in the fetishistic sense of meanings immanent in the bark of this tree or the limb of that martyr. Essences were as dubious to Howard as to any deconstructionist. In "September, The First Day of School," he doesn't trust the way the children must learn

> Three dozen bits and pieces of a stuff
> So arbitrary, so peremptory,
> That worlds invisible and visible
>
> Bow down before it . . .

just as, in "The Blue Swallows," he talks of

> The real world where the spelling mind
> Imposes with its grammar book
> Unreal relations on the blue
> Swallows.

Poetry is itself a grammar book, its unreal relations as "arbitrary" and "peremptory," in their own way, as the stuff a schoolchild learns. The pun in the phrase "spelling mind" beautifully expresses the dreaminess, even the somnolence, of a view that would make even the invisible world bow down as though understood.

Yet the idea that things in themselves simply exist—that they contain no larger significance except the "unreal relations" we egotistically impose upon them—wasn't exactly the most satisfactory proposition to Howard either. In his poems he liked to perceive the invisibility of things—which is to say, he liked to dramatize what we cannot know about even what stands or sits or plods before our very eyes. So it is that he prefers his swallows finally to be as invisible as the



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shapes into which, when we first see them, they divide the air:

> . . . I shall show you
> A new thing: even the water
> Flowing away beneath those birds
> Will fail to reflect their flying forms. . . .

Reflecting is what Howard did and loved to do. In "By Al Lebowitz's Pool," yet another of his images of water, he says:

> Reflection and reflexion, lovely words
> I shall be sorry to let go when I let go:
> Reflected light, reflexion of the wave;
> For things reflected are more solemn and still
> Than in themselves they are, it is the doubling
> Perhaps that seems to bring them nearer thought;
> Could we reflect, did water not reflect?

By swallows unreflected—both by water and mind—rather than by birds encumbered, like carrier pigeons, the poet would transport his messages to his reader. Think about but, whatever you do, don't ponder the little creatures.

Howard would have cringed, I think, at the idea that his mud turtle should remain on land, domesticate itself in the garden, be relieved of its parasitical burden, and thus—in the light of day—surrender its meaning, maybe an only meaning, once and for all. No, for an allegorical turtle of this kind my father would not have cared. The imagination, Howard would have said, dwells more upon the turtle lost than the turtle won. He would always have taken a turtle run over by the axle of the universe than a turtle that actually *was* the axle of the universe. The knock of a knuckle on that shell, I think he'd have said, produces a sound that, however loud, should be represented poetically in terms of imperceptibility. The poet should be alert to what is diaphanous about even the hardest and sturdiest of things. In "World Lines: A War Story," Howard writes about a youthful version of himself as an aviator, long since evanesced into thin air, "His buttons and bones are somewhere out there still."

By the same token, he did not want his Dayton bombardier to be furnished with an altogether transcriptive vision of what's below. One of my dad's favorite paintings was Turner's *Rain, Steam, and Speed.* He liked Turner—he gave me two books on Turner—maybe because in his paintings it's so damn hard to tell what's going on. Even if the title tells us that Ovid's been banished from Rome, or that Moses is in



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there somewhere, writing the book of Genesis, the narrative gets overblown, obfuscated in all the mauve and yellow swirls. By contrast, during a visit to the National Gallery of Art in 1990, Howard wearily eyed the magnificent stalactites of falling water in Frederic Church's transcriptive *Niagara.* He called the painting "the invention of acrylic," and I could see—for its want of mystery—that the mighty cataract was altogether more placid than Al Lebowitz's pool.

So Howard's very desire for mystery—for an elusive essence—serves a "ruining" purpose. His poems evoke a world but ritually make a world's absence a part of the evocation. In one sense this ruination might be called a form of realism. Or, to put it more precisely, it might be called a form of remorseless objectivity that, no matter how alliterated and otherwise poetically transfigured, remains in a way scientific and analytical, coldly seeking to efface the poet's presence before the scene he describes. Howard, prosaic? Yes, in a way. For the turtle's disappearance takes me away from the poem and toward a recognition of mystery, of the inexplicable, in the world the poem conjures. It is as though Howard's poems are most successful in picturing a world outside themselves, in effacing themselves as representations, when they acknowledge that picturing of this kind isn't possible: when they acknowledge that mystery and ruination are, on some level, not poetic figures but simply immanent in the world. It is a known fact, we could say, that a turtle's as translucent as the water it swims in. Thus the poet turns out to be transcriptive, even a bit prosaic, when focusing on invisibility.

On the other hand, there is a sense in which Howard's theme of the invisible takes me far from the worlds he describes. The lack of equation between word and world—the way Howard won't let the two harmonize, the way the turtle doesn't stay in the garden but disappears—returns me to the appearance of the words on a page. The world gone, words are left. They are left like a ruin. I rap on that turtle's shell and feel the ink and 25 percent cotton bond of its construction; I hear, in my rapping, the sound of the clacking typewriter keys that gave the turtle its life, as though the Johnsonian proof of the thing's existence were but an ineluctable reference to the fact that, but for a Smith Corona, it would not exist at all.

To all of this Howard might have given a great big "Hmpf." He might even have sighed as though before Ethan Allen's historical marker itself. It would be anti-climactic, wouldn't it, for the mud turtle to reappear from the deep only to announce, in amphibious tones, "Yes, I am the elusive referent." There is something sturdier about him. I can see Howard saying to me, in that mock-sonorous,



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over-the-martini way he had, "Let us stay far from an image of the world as written, or as an image of itself being written." In a way, though I could never imagine him enduring such a film, I think Howard would have agreed with Peter O'Toole's Lawrence of Arabia after he had completed an allegedly impossible trek across the desert. Addressing the man who warned him that "it is written" that no one could cross such a desert, Lawrence, spitting sand and about to fall over, says, "*Nothing* is written." Just so, for Howard. None or at least not a lot of Derrida's "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" for him. In fact, in "The Blue Swallows," it's

> Seeing the swallows' tails as nibs
> Dipped in invisible ink, writing . . .

that makes the poet sense he's got things exactly wrong. "Poems are not / The point," he says,

> Finding again the world,
> That is the point, where loveliness
> Adorns intelligible things
> Because the mind's eye lit the sun.

Yet a poem like "Models" says that, in a way, poems are the point. How we understand the world—how we tailor it to a "fit size for the mind"—is one of Howard's concerns. And I would say it is his concern even in such poems as "I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee" and "The Air Force Museum at Dayton"—poems whose beauty partly derives from the very way that poetry, mere modeling, seems effaced within them. Concentrating on crafted objects, poems such as these tend to let poetry reappear, resurface, after all. For in these poems crafted objects symbolize not only the craft of poetry itself; not only the way with scratched sight it targets the blown-out and invisible; but also, and just as movingly, poetry's irredeemably modeled quality. The worlds it gives us are, so to speak, glued and lacquered, put together.

Howard had one other metaphor—and maybe his most powerful one—for the modeled quality of his poetry. "The Air Force Museum at Dayton" and "World Lines: A War Story" are but two of his many poetical references to the airplane cockpit, the place where he spent his World War II years. If pressed, he'd tell us about his experience as an "intrepid birdman," as he deprecatingly called that earlier, aviating version of himself. He described the German planes he occasionally



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saw; the V-1 he chased in a vain effort to tip its wing and upset its gyroscope; the midget submarines and other small vessels he dived down upon off French and Dutch coasts; the time, returning to base in England, he found the pages of a bombed German ship's logbook lodged in his plane's air-intake. He told us that once a bullet came through the windshield.

When I look at my dad's poems from the late 1940s and 1950s, and even some of the later ones, I see his cockpit experience informing even the poetry that, on the face of it, doesn't have anything at all to do with the war. "I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee," published in 1955, is a poem manifestly about whaling, not warring. Yet Dad's choice of Ishmael's words for the title is strongly autobiographical, redolent of his own catastrophe recently survived. He'd just seen "the black flukes of agony," and not on any whaling voyage. He told me once that, as a Yank in the RAF, he'd been asked to join an all-American squadron flying the de Havilland Mosquito, a plane whose wooden construction made it both fast and vulnerable. (Dad flew a slower plane called a Bristol Beaufighter.) He turned down the offer to fly Mosquitoes and learned not long after that every single pilot in the American squadron had been shot down. Fast and beautiful those planes were, less like mosquitoes than the cinnamon moths of Howard's "A Rent in the Screen." (Funny how even this truly beautiful poem, with its reference to the moths flying away, should evoke his war experience.) Ishmael's words conform indeed to Howard's sense of how he'd luckily lived to tell. The words remind me of the mood of "Redeployment," a great poem published in 1950, in which a shaken soldier reflects on

> The end of the war. I took it quietly
> Enough. I tried to wash the dirt out of
> My hair and from under my fingernails,
> I dressed in clean white clothes and went to bed.
> I heard the dust falling between the walls.

Yet "I Only" contains another and subtler war imagery—one that Howard himself probably wasn't aware of. The poem includes an unusually high number of double *l*'s, mixed from beginning to end: from *tell* in the title to *tell* and *still* and *hall* in the first two lines, to *will, dallying,* and *all* (three times) in the second stanza, to *hall* and *till* in the last stanza. This is pretty unusual when you think about it. The poem also includes an equally eye-catching string of single *l*'s, some of which stand in conspicuous, artful proximity: *queenly* and *scaffolding*; then *sail, loosing, tackle, laced,* and *long lanes* . . . all in lines 22–24;



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then, close together in the last stanza, *lashed* and *blood, black* and *flukes,* and *light* and *blows*; and, maybe most strikingly, a little before we have (again)

> But all that whalebone came from whales.
> And all the whales lived in the sea,
> In calm beneath the troubled glass,
> Until the needle drew their blood.

Now, these little *l*'s have their own work to do in the poem. For one, they help elucidate the theme of violence. In its repetition, the *l* connects the whales and the *l*-ridden description of the woman's corsets: the poem mentions the corsets as "queenly scaffolding," for example. The *l*'s connotation of violence is much more forceful, though, in the line "Until the needle drew their blood." For it is in this line, specifically in the word *needle,* that I become aware of the *l*'s formal relation to the instrument of death itself, the whaler's harpoon. As an erect spear, and possessed even of a little tip on top, the small letter *l* as it appears on the page evokes the weapon. It is a little harpoon. With its repeated *l*'s, too, Howard's poem is as strewn with these needles as a forest floor. Thus, it's not just that the poem describes violence; it is that the very form of this description is itself an image of this violence—and an image, moreover, whose incessant repetition accords it a power that the single sentence, "Until the needle drew their blood," may not in itself quite have.

But the letter *l* has one other story to tell—a story about the modeling of the poem. Conjuring a harpoon, the word *needle* also refers to the directional pointer on a compass. *Moby-Dick* itself contains a chapter, called "The Needle," about the *Pequod*'s compass. As Howard's Melvillian poem asks us to see each *l* as a harpoon, so it allows us to see each *l* also as a needle—a directional pointer. In this sense Howard's many-needled poem, stretched out before me, makes me think not so much of the *Pequod*'s compass (though this is probably a reference) but of the compasses in Howard's own life—namely, those on the cockpit control panels of the planes he flew.

What comes across to me, as I read "I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee," is a faint but discernible sense of the very spot of my father's war: the airplane cockpit itself. For like such a cockpit, where Howard sat alone on his own perilous missions, his poem contains from side to side and top to bottom a series of "needles"—its carefully repeated *l*'s. In the sense of the world "out there," the beyond to which the poem is pointing, the reference to the cockpit helps transform the subject of "I Only," changing its imagery of violence into an



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oblique allegory of the war. But the needles serve a more formal purpose as well. Metaphorically evoking the cockpit, the needles call attention to the poem's own manner of regulating, controlling, and monitoring itself. In this sense, the poem refers us to—it really wants us to look at—its own internal system of organization. "I Only" evokes the cockpit not only that we might share the more vividly in the war experience that seems the poem's oblique subject but also so that we might have a look, and a loving one, at the poem's own carefully regulated operation. Howard enjoyed flying, and his poems are full of imagery seen and described outside the airplane; but he loved the imagery of the cockpit as well. The cockpit is a powerful metaphor, here and in other of his poems, for the inner workings of poetry: for form effectively enclosed from the world; for its self-contained, gauged, canopied beauty. Shakespeare himself knew as much:

> Can this cockpit hold
> The vasty fields of France? Or may we
> Cram within this wooden O the very casques
> That did affright the air at Agincourt?

It's my sentiment entirely, but how beautiful that Howard's poem should conjure poet and poem itself each within his own *O*.

I ask you last to imagine what I many times saw: Howard seated before his typewriter, in perfect poetical control. Though the image of himself perched before the machine is something he ventured mostly with deprecation—I think here of "On Being Asked for a Peace Poem"—I find the image to recur, with seductive obliquity, in evocations of the cockpit such as the one in "I Only." For such evocations call forth that other cockpit, that other place of control, even of heroic isolation, wherein the poet sits. At the end of "D-Day + All The Years," Howard seems to say as much, describing the cockpit as an "office" and pointing out the similarity between himself flying during the war and in the act of writing the poem:

> And Daddy sitting there driving along
> . . . more or less the way you see him now.

The instruments of poetry—the trope gauge, the metonymic valve, the trusty old alliterometer—these are what we see when we no longer see the world. That bombsight in "The Air Force Museum at Dayton," that instrument productive of invisibility, hunched over by its bombardier like a typewriter by its poet, is what we see at poem's end.



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What Howard's poems on some very real level make clear, make absolutely visible, is their own machinery.

A strange adulation perhaps, interpreting my father's work. I almost feel as though I should add a few footnotes just to complete the sense of this piece as long on the cold (the analytical, the interpretive) and short on the kind of reminiscing, by turns cheery and baleful, of which I used to imagine all memoirs were essentially constructed. To one of his poems, "On the Threshold of His Greatness the Poet Comes Down with a Sore Throat," Dad appended a series of footnotes he attributed to the fictitious Cyril Limkin, professor of American Literature at the University of Land's End. Perhaps some readers may think that this essay itself is something of a Limkin. Yet in another way this business of making an argument satisfies my sense of a bond with my father. It does so partly because he taught me to see the beauty of the "instruments" of writing themselves. But it does so more fundamentally because this essay, whatever its content, reminds me that it was Howard who inspired me to make things, of this or any other kind. His presence in the form of what I write about him is as strong as any presence I could evoke in a reminiscence. For this essay's buttons and bones are not its own. Nor could they ever be. And that I should somehow hold these things invisibly in my hands, and let this essay be the dramatization of that holding—let it be the dramatization of my love and evasion of such a legacy—is for me the tenderer, the truer thing.

Like Howard, when I was a boy I used to build model airplanes: Mustangs and Thunderbolts, Spitfires and Hurricanes. Building these planes, I see now, I sought to emulate his heroic flying experience. But I also sought to emulate his creative mind: to craft things, if only in the most rudimentary way. As I got a little older, my brother Jeremy and I collected a few large-scale boxes—big things that contained refrigerators and radar ranges—and took them down to the family basement, where we laid them end to end to make a long snaking fuselage. To either side of this fuselage we placed a pair of large fans: four prop engines. In the front box we cut out a couple of squares and over them slapped some Saran Wrap: a windshield. We'd sit down there for hours inside those boxes, operating the little construction-paper controls Howard had helped us fashion. Sometimes, his long legs drawn up to his chest, Howard would sit in there with us—the future poet laureate of the United States sitting inside a Frigidaire box in his own basement. Strange but (happily) true. As I got older, my emulations of Howard changed. I remember he helped Jeremy and me write a story about a ship whose crew members were pieces of



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fruit. Peter Persimmon was the first mate. My contraptions had become words on a page.

Not long after, I began writing by myself, first about airplanes and then, as now, about art and literature. A progression, I suppose. Yet I'm beginning to see a connection between the models I make now and those of my past. Those that remain of my actual airplane models, it's true, sit upon shelves in the family basement, gathering dust. A few more of them, the last time I was there, had fallen to the floor in the vicinity of the cat box, where they lay peed-upon and smashed, surrounded by cat turds that it requires no very great poetical ingenuity to say looked like bombs. (And yes, around my wrecked airplanes the lone and level kitty litter stretched far away.) Nostalgia may stink, but the memory of making these planes is still pretty fresh. It's as though my writing then, and as much now, contains the ghosts, the traces, of those first models I built, as though buzzing through an essay such as this one should somehow be the memory of the airplanes I built long ago. Snapping together the parts, checking the needles: what else if not this am I still doing when I sound Al Lebowitz's pool for its turtles and whales and drowned airmen? If I could, holding these pages in my hand, I would say: "Dad, can I fly this one by you?"



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# *Keeping Time*

*(In memory of James Luguri, 1948–1985, teacher and friend)*

PENELOPE DUCKWORTH

*To have been made alive is so chief*
*a thing; all else inevitably adds.*
–Emily Dickinson

I

The voice of a contralto spills from a building
filling the February air.
White blossoms fall from the bridal-veiled trees
and I go to visit the flowering crab apple.
There it stands, a carnival of pink and white,
all bloom and femininity, the first green leaves
pallid with newness.

II

The blossoms of spring so distracted you,
you stopped driving altogether.
Allowing time, you walked to class, prepared
for any sudden flowering in the Berkeley air.
The year you taught Dickinson with such profound attention
she waltzed with you one night in your dreams,
keeping perfect time, wearing her white dress.

Oh Jim, how you kept the time,
honoring the feasts and fasts,
filling each allotted moment.
One Easter morning, early, you walked to church.



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Coming up the street in the purple light,
your friends remembered your white suit,
    Panama hat
and your arms full of lilacs.

Weeks later, in a dark chapel
across the country, at Morning Prayer,
when we prayed for the dead,
someone added your name.

III

Since your twenties you had known
to number and treasure the days.
You saw eternity as home;
the passing time, a gift to praise.

That spring we'd been in the midst of Dante.
The class had circled up the mountain
following the penitents' footpath
and was on the brink of vision
of the beatific rose.
"We'll meet next time in Paradise," you said,
waving us out to the warm evening.

So we will, all white, with lilacs,
music drifting from the windows,
moving with measured perfection,
you and Emily at the door.

✪ PENELOPE DUCKWORTH is the Episcopal Chaplain at Stanford University. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, the *Anglican Theological Review*, and *Yankee*.



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# *Mendelssohn at Thirty-Eight*

FLOYD SKLOOT

*On 1 November 1847, Mendelssohn's condition rapidly deteriorated. He experienced the first of a series of strokes.*
–John O'Shea, "The Mendelssohn Family"

I look back on the promise of my youth
(*Felix* the fortunate) and am so tired.
A boy in auburn ringlets playing fugues
for old Goethe, a boy with liquid fire
in his hands! I glimpsed myself in glacier
wind and flood waters under the slender
Devil's Bridge. I loved the wild allegro,
the clack of trains, wind in a seaside cave.
Swiss sunlight, Monti Albani's sweet air,
Loch Lomond. I found music everywhere.
Now some mornings I am too weak to fold
back my bedsheets. There is nothing I crave
as much as silence. Not even pine trees,
the rich smell of old stones with moss upon
them, or the sight of snowy peaks would please
me. Quiet, like the moment before song
stretched out forever. Stillness, that instant
before strings quiver. This is what I want.

✪ Floyd Skloot's poems have appeared in *Harper's*, the *New Criterion*, *Shenandoah*, and many other journals.



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# MEMOIR

# Vachel Lindsay and *The Book of the Dead*

PAUL HORGAN

For about a year, spanning most of 1921 and 1922, I was, at the age of eighteen, the junior reporter on the *Albuquerque Morning Journal*. My beat was eclectic. I covered the county courthouse, the city hall, the municipal jail, and also the town's cultural events in music, drama, art, and literature.

During the early twentieth century, the values and demonstrations of the arts and the higher graces of society were everywhere in the Southwest delegated to "the ladies." The masculine world was glad to be left alone with its "real" preoccupations—making a living, raising cattle, competing in business, going hunting, flogging politics, disturbing the peace in appropriate forms on Saturday night, keeping a handgun for private use in personal irritation or insult, and otherwise in a general way working to preserve the public order. Let the leddies *have* their ly-*ce*-ums, drawn-shade tea parties, book-study lectures, and like that—it don't do no harm and it might just keep them happy. Under this principle a society managed its balance, and under mine I duly reported and even wrote reckless criticisms of the lady-directed acts of culture.

Not that I was welcome to attend all the meetings of the Albuquerque Women's Club in Gold Avenue—these generally were for women only. But when the announcement came that Vachel Lindsay, eminent American poet of the day, was coming to give a reading of his work at the Women's Club, I knew I must attend on two counts. The first was to cover the event for the *Journal*; the second was my private but powerful condition as a poet myself.

For I was writing poetry as well as short stories and newspaper pieces. I had been to Santa Fe, where I met real poets—Maurice Lesemann, Alice Corbin Henderson, Yvor Winters. I had been kindly received by painters—Josef Bakoš, Willard Nash, Frank Applegate. Santa Fe and Taos were in their early ferment of the arts, with all the airs and releases of a libertarian style of life. I breathed it with an adolescent's sense of self-recognition. Overnight, it seemed, I was prepared to be a Modernist, and my text in all the arts was *The Dial*, the magazine in whose pages I encountered T. S. Eliot, Picasso, Segonzac, Stravinsky (in reports by Paul Rosenfeld), Thomas Mann, Ezra Pound, Brancusi, Yeats, Lachaise, Ortega y Gasset, and the rest. The mundane railroad-ranching-sanatorium fabric of life in my New Mexico town might be the backdrop of my daily life, but in no sense did it limit my sense of style and reference. In the swelling vitality of youth and the energetic turmoil of a dozen aesthetic drives, I studied and harshly judged my environment even as I was held in its conventions.

One day in the street near the *Journal* I encountered an elderly Pueblo Indian who was standing at a curbside. He wore a much-used red headband, a dark coarse work shirt, denim trousers, and tennis shoes. His face was lifted to the sky. His eyes were closed. His arms were crossed on his breast. He seemed hardly to breathe. I paused to regard him. Presently he felt this. He slowly turned and acknowledged me with a little lift of his chin—the native New Mexican greeting.

"Excuse me," I said.

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He met this with civil silence. I had never addressed an Indian before. I had seen the Corn Dance at the pueblo of Santo Domingo—that great collective physical prayer for rain, growth, and harvest. It had moved me to an experimental poem directly influenced by Vachel Lindsay, with bold rhythmic poundings and marginal directions of vocal scoring. But I had yet to find the central image for the Pueblo people and their danced prayer. My poem was unfinished. How did they behold themselves? After a long moment of our exchanged silences, I said to the Indian at the curb, "Do you hear English?"

He nodded. I went on, then: "Pueblo people—how do they say who they are? What name? I mean, I am an American; what are the Pueblo people?"

"*Ha-no-o-shatch,*" he said.

I repeated the words. He nodded.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Children of the sun. We are the children of the sun."

I must have lighted up with joy, for he leaned back slightly, let his eyelids drop a trifle, and smiled, and then gravely went on his way across the street and was lost among walkers on the other side.

But he left me with a wonderfully suggestive image of his people, and that night after the paper went to bed I hurried home and worked until daylight on revising my poem. It took the form of a solo voice with choral interludes, drum beats, and recurring invocations of the sun, and I gave it the title "The Dance of Hano-o-shatch." It ran for five pages—the most ambitious literary work of my life so far; and clearly, its ancestry included Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo."

In those days Lindsay was accepted as one of the most important exponents of "The New Poetry." I had encountered him in the anthology of that name edited by Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson. His most powerful effects were obtained by use of words of strong, direct beat, and patterns of percussive rhythms. He was ideal for reading aloud by oneself. He was famous as a wandering bard, an Apostle of Beauty. He held me more than his fellow stars of the New Poetry did—Amy Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost. He would soon be coming to Albuquerque for his reading at the Albuquerque Women's Club. I laid my plans.

## II

As I arrived, the atmosphere was subdued by intense respect for culture. If anyone spoke it was in cleared throat and whispers. The Club's public room held portable chairs for perhaps fifty people. All were taken. It was a warm evening. The air was close. The draperies at the windows were drawn together against the vulgar world. In the bare floor area that served as a stage, a vase of florist's flowers stood on a small, tapestry-covered table. A door to the left was closed. It closeted the room from which the poet would emerge, as we could tell by the low rumbling sound of a heavy voice warming up. Inside my jacket bulked the sheaf of my poem under which my heart went tumbling.

Suddenly, and with dramatic violence, the side door was flung open, and the poet came before us treading a dance step. I had formed no image of him, but still his appearance was startling. Of medium height and stocky frame, he had a thatch of carrot-colored hair that quivered every which way with energy above his pallid, mole-studded face. His brow seemed swollen above his small deep-set eyes with their white lashes. His nose was wide and flat; the nostrils flared. His lips were thick, and his chin rounded toward his active Adam's apple. If he seemed oddly out of focus, the effect was increased by the way he held his gaze above all our heads and shifted it from side to side rapidly, a sideways blink, while we welcomed him with applause that rang flat in the confined clubroom.

He stood in silence, a moment of concentration, while we examined in amazement how he was dressed. I had supposed that in his character of wandering poet he might appear in something loosely unconventional—open collar, flowing scarf, velvet jacket; but here he posed in full formal evening dress. His black tailcoat gaped about his shoulders. His white stiff collar and tie stood away from his neck. His starched cuffs were too long and his white waistcoat did not quite meet his trousers. The boiled front of his shirt was already buckled by body heat. He reminded me of the comedy "Toby" character in the traveling tent shows that toured country towns—straw should have escaped from his collar. He was a hayseed, dressed in misplaced elegance conforming to the tradition that concerts and recitals required—full evening dress.



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A hayseed—but in a moment, a commanding hayseed; for in a bass voice of beaded heaviness he suddenly announced "The Congo," and the painfully refined little club room throbbed to the effect of his barbaric lines:

Fat black bucks in a wine-barrel room,
Barrel-house kings with feet unstable,
Sagged and reeled and pounded on the table,
Pounded on the table,
Beat an empty barrel with the handle of a broom,
Hard as they were able,
Boom, boom, BOOM,
With silk umbrella and the handle of a broom,
Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM. . . .
THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH THE BLACK
CUTTING THROUGH THE JUNGLE WITH A GOLDEN TRACK.

He made the room resonate. His whole body gave out the rhythms in convulsive strikes. He became a total instrument. The charge upon us was so direct and sudden that I felt an irrational impulse to laugh and, at the same moment, somehow, to join with him in full communion of voice and gesture. He choreographed his poem as much as declaimed it. To support his lyrics he made his fists into great drumsticks, beating the air. His face became a grotesque mask and then seemed to melt into blind ecstasy. He twisted his torso and sent his coattails flying. He pumped his thighs and beat the floor with full foot for his heavy accents. He leaped into space in a trance. He waved his hands in the air for religious glory. He spent himself wholly.

Transfixed, like the culture-hungry matrons all about, I was pulled into the poem more fully than I could have been by simply reading his lines upon the page.

Wild crapshooters with a whoop and a call
Danced the juba in their gambling-hall,
And laughed fit to kill, and shook the town,
And guyed the policemen and laughed them down,
With a boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM. . .

and on for nearly half an hour.

And they all repented, a thousand strong,
From their stupor and savagery and sin and wrong,
And slammed with their hymn-books till they shook the room,
With "Glory, glory, glory,"
And "Boom, boom, BOOM."
THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH THE BLACK . . .

and at the end, the jungle powers are conquered—no longer:

"Mumbo jumbo will hoodoo you . . . "

this finale delivered, according to the marginal scoring, "Dying down into a penetrating, terrifying whisper."

An exhausted silence overcame us in our metal chairs as the poet tripped away to his offstage room. He left us in his spell, and when he returned he was in another mode, balanced lightly on tiptoe, with his arms floating before him as if to describe and enfold some mysterious element of grace. He rose to it in strange delight. If you thought of what he really looked like, his delicacy was absurd; but in his self-tranced state, it was moving and exquisite. "The Chinese Nightingale: A Song in Chinese Tapestries," he announced as he reached center stage, and began:

"How, how," he said, "Friend Chang,"
I said,
"San Francisco sleeps as the dead—
Ended license, lust and play:
Why do you iron the night away?"

It was another long narrative, combining tourist Chinatown and passionate fairy tale. Firecrackers and joss sticks, faraway princess, "marvel and dream," Chinese nightingale, bird as prophet:

Do you remember,
Ages after,
Our palace of heart-red stone?
Do you remember
The little doll-faced children
With their lanterns full of moon-fire . . .
"Darling . . . darling . . . darling"
Said the Chinese nightingale.

The lines came in heightened song, now a



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whisper, now a long flute-like note. The poet strained upward on tiptoe, striving to levitate, arms like temple towers, hands fluttering like birds of desire, eyes shut away by visions far beyond the Women's Club of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

> I remember, I remember
> There were ghostly veils and laces . . .
> In the shadowy, bowery places . . .
> With lovers' ardent faces
> Bending to one another,
> Speaking each his part.
> They infinitely echo
> In the red cave of my heart.
> "Sweetheart, sweetheart, sweetheart!"
> "One thing I remember:
> Spring came on forever,
> Spring came on forever,"
> Said the Chinese nightingale.

Another dying fall. The poet retired. We stirred and sighed. Gone was Toby in his carrot wig and his rumpled dress suit. Even the sense of the lines—and there was not all that much sense—did not matter.

It was the abstract fabric of sound, the poet's passion of conviction, the dancing actor's gift of self, that enthralled us. Awash in floating images, we awaited his return.

When he came, it was in another mood. He was quiet, direct, lyrical, as he recited a group of shorter poems, including, I think, "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight (In Springfield, Illinois)."

> It is portentous, and a thing of state
> That here at midnight in our little town,
> A mourning figure walks, and will not rest,
> Near the old court-house pacing up and
> down . . .

The concert was over. The president of the Women's Club went forward to thank and congratulate. She indicated that many ladies would like to do the same. Meantime, the aroma of fresh coffee emerged from the side room. Trays of miniature sandwiches appeared. Ardent listeners crowded about Vachel Lindsay. He smiled and nodded, smiled and nodded, consuming handfuls of the special delicacies and several cups of coffee. I remained in my seat. I had come to present myself and my poem, but I suddenly felt shy about accosting the poet.

It was not long until I was aware that Lindsay was eyeing me across matronly shoulders. He seemed to invite me forward, the only one in the room not reaching for him.

He received me with mute appraisal. His tangled white eyelashes, the silent stare of uncertainty, made me think for a moment of a white-faced calf. His face was coarsely porous. I held my poem in its large envelope. Finally he said, "Is that a manuscript?"

"Yes," I said.

He took it and slapped it smartly against his breast, and said, now with a gentle smile, "Yes, this is what happens, I am always glad to—so come and have breakfast with me tomorrow morning. I am staying at the Alvarado"—the railroad hotel in mid-town—"and we shall discuss your work. Come at seven-thirty. My train for the West leaves at eight-fifteen. Lovely. Good night."

He was suddenly tired. With a hurried wave he made a blanket farewell to the members, snatched up his check from the madame president (seventy-five dollars, we heard) and was gone. Why, I wondered, apart from homage to poetry, did I feel something both pathetic and comic about the whole evening? I said to myself, "Poetry must be hard work."

## III

At half past seven next morning I found him in the dining room of the Alvarado Hotel. He saw me in the doorway and waved me to him. He was dressed now in ordinary day clothes, a shapeless tweed suit of rust color, a starched high collar with its exposed collar button above the necktie knot. He was in a jovial mood. As they used to say, he was making a good breakfast, with grapefruit, coffee, toast, preserves, eggs, pancakes, bacon, and fried potatoes deployed before him. He urged me to sit down and order breakfast for myself, but I was too diffident to eat. All I wanted was to hear about my manuscript.

"See here," he said, indicating a large open book that he had set up against a sugar bowl. His words rang throughout the dining room. He had an irreducible bass voice—the kind that makes itself heard above anything else in any enclosed space. I was increasingly embarrassed to be a partner to it. "This is *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, which always travels with me. It is a book of the ghostliest wisdom, out of



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the deep past, and with a tremendous message for the present we live in now."

He showed me the pages. They were divided into upper and lower halves. The upper carried reproductions of hieratic and hieroglyphic inscriptions; the lower, translations into English.

"Do you know what this book is about?"

"No."

"It is a brave and compassionate hymn against the evils that threaten the soul on its way to eternal life. Imagine the beauty and power of this idea!"

The text, it seems, consisted of inscriptions painted or drawn or incised on walls of tombs, pyramids, or coffin lids, and copied into papyrus rolls by scribes. The rolls were then buried with the dead person to protect against the spells of Set, the "arch-liar and god of evil." I do not recall exactly all the learned scraps that Vachel Lindsay poured out upon me that morning as he pursued pancakes and home fries and coffee; but to suggest the substance of his rapt recital I have consulted the 1920 monograph on *The Book of the Dead* by the British Museum's Professor E. A. Wallis Budge of the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities. What I do remember is Lindsay's eloquence as he stifled my impatience to hear him talk not about funerary customs of four millenia past but about my poem.

Yes: it seems that Rā was the king of the sky, and Osiris was the king of the Dead-land, or Tat. Grand polarities! And think of the humble acts of judgment upon those passing from sky to Tat: the heart was actually weighed on scales to determine its state of virtue or vice! What a power in that image to evoke the eternal good! "Here!" he said. "Look at this tiny, sweet picture of the heart on the scales!" I could not decipher it.

(The clock on the dining room wall was ticking off minutes to train time—the tracks were just outside the hotel—soon he must run for it, and where was my manuscript?)

"See this image—" he showed me the Holy Ape Gods singing to Rā at sunrise, with a great bird facing *left* toward the dawn; and then opposite, the Holy Jackal Gods singing to Rā at sundown, with the great bird facing *right* to the coming night. And every inflection came not from words but—this was it!—from pictures!

(His train would leave in eighteen minutes.)

He was still enjoying his breakfast though without interrupting his echoing rhapsody of the dead in the Fred Harvey dining room, while people at other tables looked at each other in a certain way.

So what was the immense, wonderful lesson in *The Book of the Dead* for us in our time? It was nothing less than its prediction, through its preservation and transfer of meaning, that all knowledge in the future would come through pictures! Did I understand? Pictures only!

(No, and I had the courage to point to the clock.)

Ignoring this, he made a mellow, pumpkin face to convey wonder at revelation, and he said, "What it means is that the literature of words is done for! Everything will be told in pictures, and not so far off! Look: what art reaches more people now than any known before by man?" I was blank. "Why, what about the moving picture! Its inventor, Edison, is the new Gutenberg!" he cried. "The moving picture needs no words—only movement, gestures, the darling eloquence of the human face! Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Theda Bara, William Farnum, Mabel Taliaferro, John Bunny, Blanche Sweet—the conduits of genius! Think! when all is to be learned only from images!"—this before talking pictures, of course.

(At a nearby table the train conductor rose from his own breakfast and headed for the tracks. He knew his train time. I pointed.)

"Yes, yes, we might go now. Come with me."

Shutting his book and snatching up from under the table his battered, many-strapped Gladstone suitcase, he clutched my arm and we loped out to the tracks. At the last car he paused to speak to the conductor like one son of labor to another, confided that he was "for California," and leaped to the car step. I began to frame a bitter farewell, but he reached for my arm and pulled me on board. Foraging down the aisle of the car, he found two empty seats on the sunny side, settled in at the window, and drew me down next to him.

"I'd better say good-bye, Mr. Lindsay. The train is about to—"

"No, no, my lad, plenty of time. —Do you see it all? Rā the sun-god will be duplicated in the ray of arc light needed to project the film, while we *watch* instead of *read* the story unfolding before us! In the darkened room we will be in the kingdom of Osiris! *The Book of the*



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*Dead* will teach us life anew through the moving picture!"

It must have been eight-fifteen, for the conductor outside gave his long cry, "All 'board!" and I stood up.

"Well, good-bye Mr. Lindsay," I said. "May I have my poem back? I have to go now."

"Ah, it is in my Gladstone. I will write to you." The train began to move. He shook my hand. "Think of me as the disciple of the all-picture mind!"

"I really have to—"

"Then good-bye! good-bye! if you must!"

I ran the length of the car, out the rear door, and threw myself, half falling, on to the brick and cinders platform of the trackside as Santa Fe train #9 picked up speed for Belen, Gallup, Flagstaff, and the Coast.

## IV

Why? In my consuming disappointment over Vachel Lindsay's failure to talk about my poem and crown it with his praise, I wondered why he had instead given over my precious forty-five minutes with him to a monologue about *The Book of the Dead.* I had no answer.

But almost a year later I received a letter from the poet. He enclosed my original typescript of "The Dance of Ha-no-o-shatch." Its margins were filled with comments in large, scroll-like writing that leaned toward the backhand. He filled an added page with criticism. His verdict was negative. I cannot quote him—I kept my typescript and his letter for years until they disappeared when a flood destroyed files in my library at Roswell, New Mexico; but I do remember the main point of his response.

All that was wrong with my poem lay in the fact that it was not really *my* poem—it was a well-tried imitation of his own work, notably in "The Congo." If my piece was meant as a compliment to him, it was not a compliment—it was an intrusion. In honesty, he could not accept as true poetry anything so unoriginal. He would wish more success for me in other works that would be forged from within my own experience and vision of form. Meantime, he recognized a certain facility in my handling of the language, which, when refined until it should sound like that of no one else, might exhibit a true literary style. It had been a pleasure to meet me, and he wished me as a fellow poet all fulfillment in the future.

I licked my wounds for a day or two until I began to admit the justice of his general thrust. He was, I granted, quite right. With that recognition out of the way, I was free to wonder all over again why he had devoted our brief time together to *The Book of the Dead* rather than to me, the living.

All I know is that he was enraptured as he spoke to me of his discoveries and theories. Perhaps the awesome mystery of the dynasties and the beauty of their hope of the afterlife obsessed his imagination to the exclusion of nearer concerns. Throughout wondering generations people have felt the brooding influence of the spirit preserved in papyrus and tomb and have responded to it in a hundred different ways. Credulities about the occult have changed peoples' lives, sometimes with tragic effect.

Intermittently, Lindsay returned in mid-life, and finally for the rest of his last years, to the house in Springfield, Illinois, where he was born. It was a fine mid-American house, at 603 South Fifth Street—a flatly American address. (In mid-century it had been the scene of a farewell party for Abraham Lincoln as he set forth from Springfield for Washington and the presidency.) In that South Fifth Street house, his first and last home, Vachel Lindsay, preoccupied for so long with his analyzed ancient system—a poetics of death—took his own life by swallowing Lysol on September 5, 1931. I do not suggest cause and effect; I only wish to complete the record. He was only fifty-two years old when, under the solemnities of Osiris in *The Book of the Dead,* his heart would have been weighed on scales to determine its state of virtue. . . .

Living concerns with the aspirations and powers of Tat, the Dead-land, have also changed human lives, even, of course, in our day, and sometimes have done so hilariously: I know of a civil service employee in a Washington office who circulated a form letter throughout his vast bureau that read:

*To Whom It May Concern*

From this day forward, the undersigned desires to be known as Aman Rā.

(signed) Aman Rā



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# Letter from Kyoto

JOHN LOWE

Kyoto is celebrating the twelve-hundredth anniversary of its founding in 794 as the capital of Japan. Although Tokyo became the new capital at the start of the Meiji period in 1868, Kyoto remains for Japanese people the cultural and religious heart of their country.

In 793, Emperor Kammu decided to abandon his short-lived and ill-fated capital at Nagaoka, where he had moved from Nara in 784. He gave orders for the building of a new capital a few kilometers to the north. This was to be Heiankyo, literally "Capital of Peace and Ease." Informally, it was also called Kyoto, or "Capital City," and by the eleventh century this had become its official name. Emperor Kammu moved to his unfinished palace in the autumn of 794, his installation marking the official founding of the city.

Kyoto lies at the northern end of the Kyoto fault basin. The emperor's surveyors would have assessed the area by the principles of Chinese geomancy, an ancient mixture of science and superstition. The site was bordered by two rivers, running north and south. The mountains protected it on three sides: and the northeast, recognized as the source of evil influences, and called "the devil's mouth," was protected by the highest peak along the eastern range. These features were all auspicious. And beyond that, they composed a place of outstanding beauty, though not blessed with the most benign winter and summer climates.

Twelve hundred years is an impressive span of time. I have only known Kyoto for a little over a quarter of a century. However, it is a large part of my adult life, and for twenty-seven years I have visited it at least once a year, eventually living there for twelve years. In the early days, I had to spend most of my time working in Tokyo. I have also traveled over most of Japan. But when away from Kyoto, I always share the feelings of the ninth-century poet, Ariwara Narihira:

> More and more
> Do I yearn for
> The capital I have left.
> Oh how I envy
> Waves that can return.

I did return; and I have loved Kyoto for its fascination as an ancient city; for the people I have known there; and above all else, for everything it has taught me about Japan: pleasant experiences, and a few less agreeable. Some of these I recall here, random reflections that reveal the love-hate relationship any honest Western observer of Japan must experience.

I first went to Kyoto in the autumn of 1967. I remember the journey on the "Bullet Train" from Tokyo. It was the honeymoon season. The "Green Car" was full and, without doubt, my guide, Akiko, and I were the only couple in the carriage who were not newlyweds. We were also the only couple to exchange a word between Tokyo and Kyoto. The young bridegrooms thumbed restlessly through their magazines. Their young brides sought silent inspiration—or distraction—from the passing view. Goodness, I wondered! Is it Kyoto or marriage that is such a dull prospect?

Twenty-seven years later, I could give various answers to that question. Basically, most of the young men would rather have been back in their offices in the safe company of their colleagues, and most of the girls would have

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loved a few days in Kyoto, but with a girlfriend or their mother.

The honeymoon is only one of Japan's ill-judged imports from the West since the last war. Unlike the French baguette or Scotch whisky, it is not easily accommodated within the framework of Japanese life. But it has become a ritual that must be observed. And now, travel agents and glossy magazines—rituals are not above commercialization—conspire to persuade young couples to honeymoon—no longer in Kyoto—but in Australia and more remote destinations, which means, perhaps fortunately, that a large part of their brief holiday is spent in an airplane.

I have been involved in both the darker and the lighter sides of the Japanese honeymoon. Once, in a Kyoto hotel, a hysterical girl nearly broke down my door, seeking asylum from her new husband. And on a remote island in the Philippines, an endearing young Japanese couple, overwhelmed with needless shame, sought my help when the girl showed signs of a miscarriage. The letter they wrote to me when their son was safely born was absurdly generous, but very touching, and a happy reminder that there are love-marriages in Japan.

With the honeymoon came the "white wedding," and it didn't stop there. The reality is that you can get married in Japan with a quick signature at your local ward office. Most people like to go a little further, with the exchange of cups of sake under the supervision of a Shinto priest. Thereafter, you can do anything you like, and a lot of young people do, with considerable encouragement from the wedding halls.

The norm is for the bride to make a change of hired costume roughly with each course of the wedding banquet; no inconvenience for her, as by tradition, she does not eat, or smile, at the nuptial feast.

So, it is a kimono with the lobster thermidor; white moiré silk and a lace veil with the beef Wellington; and for the more enterprising, a flamenco mantilla or a twist of tartan with the *Glace en surprise*; then, out of the door and away in a neat little suit from Paris. If you suspect that I am being frivolous—or fictional—I assure you that I have seen it all, and sat through the compulsory eleven wedding speeches.

Frivolous? I once saw an advertisement in a Japanese magazine, offering young couples, with or without the faith, a full-dress nuptial mass, in a mock Roman Catholic church. It probably had a ring of bells or, at least, a Sony simulation. The bridal pair, having taken communion in both kinds, were sent on their way with the chalice—engraved with their names and the sacerdotal date—as a souvenir. The Japanese, eager for Western novelties, tend to confuse the sacred and the profane, partly because it is a distinction becoming rare in their own society.

But we must return to Kyoto in 1967. When we came out from the north side of Kyoto station, I suffered a cultural shock that must be experienced by any reasonably sensitive first-time visitor to Kyoto. I looked up to take in the ancient townscape, but no temple or shrine greeted my reverential gaze. Instead—"soaring 131 m high," as the national guidebook struggles to romanticize it—we were confronted with the grotesque and phallic Kyoto tower, a structure of exceptional ugliness, casting its unforgivable shadow over the courtyard of the neighboring Nishi-Honganji temple. The tower is an eloquent monument to all that is foolish in Kyoto's municipal life. The most conservative of cities, it likes to assume various avant-garde poses, such as its pride in a one-time Communist mayor and, well—the obtrusive and inappropriate Kyoto tower.

After recovering from that anticlimax, we took a taxi to the Miyako Hotel. It was becoming dark, and we saw little more that evening. I remember the moment when I first fell under Kyoto's spell. The morning sun woke me. I looked out of the window and had my first real sight of the city. My room was high up, and it was almost an aerial view. Dark cedars, the crimson and orange maples flaming among them, covered the steep flank of the eastern mountains. Below was a wood of pines, among which hovered sweeping roofs of silver-gray tiles, like the wings of great birds. They were massive but with a wonderful gracefulness. The soft, clear autumn sunlight gave magic to the view. It was exotic, and it was beautiful. In fact, it was the great Zen temple of Nanzen-ji, whose many sub-temples spread out around its main buildings. In that view I found all that I had hoped for, and I fell in love with Kyoto.

And what of Emperor Kammu's capital city, now twelve-hundred years old? Kyoto, so vulnerable to fire because it was a wooden city, has suffered endless waves of destruction, yet



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Heiankyo still contributes to the character of the modern town. Emperor Kammu, under the Chinese influence dominant in Japan at that time, laid out his new city after the plan of the contemporary T'ang capital, Chang'an (today's Xi'an).

The checkerboard pattern—*Jyobo-sei*—of his original wide avenues still exists. It gives modern Kyoto a formal and spacious plan, or it did so until the town was overwhelmed by traffic. There have, of course, been fundamental changes. Heiankyo covered twenty-three square kilometers, with a population of a few thousand. Today, Kyoto is Japan's seventh largest city, spread over 611 square kilometers, with a population of around one and a half million. In contrast to many Western cities, Kyoto has spread eastward. The Kamogawa River, the eastern boundary of Heiankyo, now runs through the center of modern Kyoto.

Emperor Kammu's palace, which was set in a large enclosure in the north of the city, was finally destroyed by fire in 1788, and the Imperial Palace was moved to its present site, in the center of the enlarged town. In 1895, the imposing Heian shrine and garden were built to commemorate the eleven-hundredth anniversary. The shrine was dedicated to Emperor Kammu and Emperor Komei, first and last emperors to reign from Kyoto. The great entrance gate and the main building, crimson and yellow in the Chinese style, are reduced replicas of Emperor Kammu's palace buildings, suggesting the original grandeur of Heiankyo.

By an extraordinary chance, one fragment of the original imperial grounds has survived. To the southwest of Nijo castle, there is a large pond of an acre or two, partly surrounded by trees, but on the far side, an open bank where a few small Shinto shrines stand by the water. It is a remnant of Shinsen-en—"the divine spring garden"—a thirty-three acre pleasure ground, which adjoined the southern end of the imperial enclosure. Within the palace precincts there were no gardens: just plum, cherry, wistaria, and paulownia, set in large tubs around the courtyards. So Shinsen-en was a popular retreat with the emperor and his court, an agreeable setting for banquets, poem-parties, wrestling matches, military exercises, and fishing in the lakes. Now it is only a pleasant pond where the ducks hold sway. But it is characteristic of Japan that a garden should have survived the centuries.

I have walked and bicycled around the streets of Kyoto for twenty-seven years, and afternoon after afternoon, I have made new discoveries, until I have come to believe that the sights of Kyoto are endless. During those years I have so often been asked by intending visitors to Japan, "How long should I allow for Kyoto?" I used to reply, "Well, at least one week, and two if you can." Now, more experienced, I am tempted to reply, "As long as you can. At least one lifetime, though two would be better."

There is not only a vast amount to see in Kyoto—more than in any other city in the world of comparable size—but also, so many of the sights enjoy fine natural settings—a city for all seasons. For example, you must see the Heian shrine with the spring plum and cherry blossoms; its garden ponds brave with the summer iris; the long bridge set against the fiery splendor of the fall; and, during those three frosty days of New Year, when young girls—bright in their long-sleeved kimonos—stand oblivious of the fluttering snow, intent on their fortune-telling papers. When you have seen all that, then you can claim some acquaintance with the Heian shrine.

Not wishing to appear too demanding, I didn't mention the summer-night performance of a Noh play, the stage lit at each corner by flaring braziers. And *Shichi-Go-San*, the children's November festival, when Heian's courtyard is brilliant and enchanting with little girls wearing their first kimono: their obi tied in large intricate bows that sit like huge butterflies on their small backs. To see all of that is to know the Heian shrine even better. And Kyoto is a city of festivals, one almost every day of the year. Many temples and shrines only come fully to life on their festive day.

It was not until I moved to the northeast corner of central Kyoto, a district called Ichijoji, that I fully appreciated the abundance of Kyoto sightseeing. I had friends in that part of the city and, perhaps because I always visited them at night, I thought it a suburban corner of little interest. One day they telephoned to ask if I was still interested in renting a traditional Japanese house. That, in fact, had been my ambition ever since I first visited Kyoto, but in Japan such dreams are only fulfilled after years of patience. Perseverance is more admired in Japan than enthusiasm.



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The house in Saikata-cho was more perfect than I had dared to hope. It stood at one end of a large garden. The main house had belonged to a wealthy doctor who specialized in Chinese medicine. He was passionate about the tea ceremony, and apart from two rustic teahouses that stood by the main pond, fifty years ago he had built a large traditional pavilion, where guests waited to attend the tea ceremony.

It was built of the finest materials: planks of rare wood from China, other surfaces lacquered and gilt, and everywhere a frame of smooth cedar. The main room, which took up most of the house, was enclosed on three sides by sliding paper screens, neatly fitted with panels that slid upward to reveal outer panels of glass. Thus, a band of glass went all round the room, and seated on the floor, one could enjoy the garden without opening the main screens. It was ideal for "snow viewing." Across the back wall was an elaborate, double *tokonoma*, an alcove where, on special occasions, the tea ceremony could be performed.

It was a beautiful room, the paper screens giving the light a soft pearl-like quality. That more than made up for the fact that all the other amenities—a desk, a dining area, and a small kitchen—had to be squeezed into the *roka*, the wide corridor that ran around the outside of the central room. I did start with a lavatory housed in a separate tea-ceremonial building—handsome but not convenient. After a number of midnight journeys through the snow, I weakened and installed a more Western convenience in the small bathroom at the back.

The doctor had been dead for some years, and the whole property was now owned by his widow—reputed to be more than eighty years old—who stalked the garden in an ill-fitting wig, satisfying a curiosity that was only outstripped by her meanness, which, sadly, allowed her to let everything fall into disrepair. However, I weathered her disagreeable character for several years.

The little house was perfect for me, and my Japanese friends—who would rather have died than live there themselves—considered it most *suitable*. It was suitable because they had cast me as one of the latter-day literati. Now, removed from a modern apartment, I was fulfilling my role, a *bunjin* or hermit-scholar, remote on the mountainside in a rather dilapidated cottage.

Everyone has a role in Japan, and everyone should fulfill it. Opposite the apartment I had just left, a large traditional house was demolished and a virtual replica was built on the site. I asked my landlady why the people had not rebuilt in a more modern and convenient style. "Ah!" she replied, "They are important kimono merchants. They have no choice." I was free to make any choice I liked, but everyone was delighted that I made a *suitable* choice.

Apart from the charm of the house and garden, I soon discovered that Ichijoji, far from being suburban, was full of interesting historical remains, with the added advantage that a few minutes away, a steep path led to the wooded slopes of Higashiyama, with more history and deserted countryside. I had only been living in Ichijoji a few weeks, when a magazine asked me to write an essay about a Kyoto neighborhood. I chose my own, determined to seek out every local trace of the past.

I made a good start. In a narrow lane immediately behind my house, I found Kompuku-ji temple. The buildings were undistinguished, but on the azalea-covered hill behind the temple was a rustic teahouse, marking the place where Japan's most famous poet, Matsuo Basho, had stayed briefly in 1670. A little further north, I found the site of Ichijo-ji temple, from which the district takes its name, and nearby, an old Edo-style fire station.

Literature is well-represented. At the main crossroads, just below the neighborhood shrine, a pine tree marks the dueling ground of the celebrated swordsman and writer, Miyamoto Musashi. He was the author of *The Book of Five Rings*, a Zen-ish treatise that was widely taken up by American businessmen a few years ago, with a new message "Of How to Succeed by Trying Very Hard!"

Along here is the old road to Mount Hiei, which, throughout the medieval period, was the seat of a great monastic complex. On the left is a quaint group of buildings, which for a long time housed the official guardians of the route, who controlled the traffic to Hiei and made sure that no woman approached the holy mountain. The family, who were hereditary guardians, began to serve refreshments to travelers and developed a pickle made of aubergines. This has remained popular and is now their only business, people coming from all over Kyoto to the Kirarazaka, as the rustic shop is called.



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And so history unfolds in an abundance of detail: rice fields, old farmhouses with gardens rambling around their courtyards, important sights like the beautiful scholar's retreat of Shisendo, and the extravagant architecture and marvelous dry garden of Manshu-in temple. And, in between, narrow lanes where streams trickle along the ditches, and there is a glimpse through a bamboo grove of a silent nunnery by a silent pond. And always, crook-backed old women, as old as any history, bent over neat rows of radishes, their heads carefully wrapped in white cloths marked with bold blue patterns. This was an intimate view of an older, more agricultural Kyoto, but little is left, and each year more and more is buried by new rows of houses and apartment blocks.

All these experiences occurred long after I first came to live in Kyoto. That was an ambition I had nursed for years, until in 1979, when I was invited to be visiting professor in British Cultural Studies at Doshisha, the largest private university in Kyoto. Originally invited for one year, I stayed for two and, despite my title, taught mostly English and American literature, which was my personal rather than my professional subject.

Since I am about to make some sharp criticisms of Japanese university education, let me begin by saying that those two years at Doshisha were among the happiest of my life. I am not an academic, but I am interested in education, and, unlike many academics, I enjoy teaching and regard it as the most sacred trust after parenthood. It is tragic that the art of teaching has, in recent times, been downgraded in comparison with research. The two should be interlocked, but good teaching deserves as much respect as treadmill publication.

Kyoto is the leading center of Japanese university education after Tokyo. Headed by Kyoto university—important for its scientific and medical research—the city contains thirty-nine universities or other places of higher learning, a phrase largely as inappropriate as the word *university,* in its traditional Western sense. Nearly all these institutions are private and highly commercial. Many professors are obliged to visit a particular area in Japan each year to drum up trade by encouraging the recruitment of students. Very big money is involved, and the universities exploit the wish of parents to have their children, and especially their daughters, "finished," or "gilded for marriage" as the Japanese put it, by spending four years breathing Kyoto's cultural air.

Doshisha—founded by Niijima Jo in 1873, after he had graduated from Amherst—has more than twenty thousand students. Its faculty of English and American literature is reputed to be the best in Japan, and it must be the largest. Its mainly female student body now requires more than twenty professors. In 1979, the same faculty at Kyoto University had one professor.

In retrospect, I feel that I was offered my visiting professorship at Doshisha for the sake of my degree in English literature from Oxford. It was considered prestigious to have an "MA Oxon" listed in the recruitment brochure. Having exploited my degree, the faculty, I sometimes thought, might have been happier if I had stayed at home. But in fact, it was Harvard, not Oxford, that got me the job. A colleague later gave me an account of the faculty meeting at which my appointment was discussed. Everything was going against me. I was not an academic. I had not published enough. But just as the vote was about to be cast, a respected member of the faculty intervened. "I heard this man lecture at Harvard University. We must have him." I was appointed, though nobody bothered to inquire about the esoteric and totally irrelevant subject of my lecture at Harvard. A good "brand name" is everything in Japan.

My welcome to this unfamiliar world was not warm. Inquiring at the faculty office, I found that I had been given a room in the long corridor where all the professors were accommodated. Nobody offered to show me round, and it was not until several days later that I discovered that the excellent department library was next door to my room! That may have been partly because it was so little used.

The only colleague who spoke to me was the chairman of the faculty. He was fifty, an exact contemporary of mine, but by assuming a stoop, a rather unkempt hairstyle, and a shuffling gait, he tried to increase his authority by appearing older. He inquired how I was getting to the campus. "By bicycle," I replied. "Oh! Do you think that is wise at *your age?*" *Suitable* was what he really meant. People who rode bicycles were not going to achieve the gravitas that would give them a voice at faculty meetings. But I did not attend faculty meet-



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ings, and if my bicycle was not "suitable," it was extremely convenient.

I had been assigned five lectures each week and left to choose my own subjects. To my surprise, I found that four of my lectures were advertised as "seminars." The expectation of cozy Socratic afternoons was soon shattered. The chairman stumbled into my office, pale with responsibility. "Lowe-sensei, something terrible has happened. Your Shakespeare seminar and your seminar on English life and literature are heavily oversubscribed. We have at least one hundred applications for each class. You see, forty students is the maximum for this kind of seminar."

Forty students seemed excessive for any kind of seminar, but the chairman explained that these so-called seminars were a privilege for fourth-year students. "It's not a great problem," I said. "We can divide the applicants into two classes and I will give the same lecture twice a week. A little color returned to the chairman's cheeks. "Would you really?" he gasped with relief. I felt that in his world, collaboration in bending the rules was unusual.

In Japan, young people achieve a place at university by undergoing three years of cramming at their senior high schools, an experience rightly called the "examination hell." It damages their eyesight, does little for their health, and nothing for their minds. But before they descend into other forms of hell—mainly Japanese company life—students are provided by universities with four years of licensed holiday; many parents also provide them with prodigious amounts of pocket money.

Medical students work hard, and more is expected of scientists, but those who wish to rest avoid such subjects and relax with the humanities. Before I started at Doshisha, I was warned about all this, and also urged not to fail students in their final exams. I was told that I would get a full attendance at my opening lectures, since they were obligatory, but after that, I must not mind if few students came.

Being more a man of the theater than of the classroom—an "empty house" suggests a poor performance—I felt challenged. I also suspected that the students were mostly being bored to death. My colleagues made little secret of their dislike of teaching, and their lecture notes had been so long in use, they would have fallen apart if not grasped with both hands. There were a few honorable exceptions, but not many. I have seldom met a more idle body of men; they spent much of the day sipping at take-away noodles in the cubicle that served as our common room.

The students may have been lazy, but they were delightful and easily interested if presented with a stimulating subject to which they could relate, or at which they could laugh. I was helped by the collection of color slides I had brought with me, illustrating English life and literature. Strangely, in the land of Nikon, Japanese education had bypassed visual aids, and I learned that not a single slide was shown during the four-year course on Japanese art. My slides were a great novelty, and the students called them the "free movies."

Encouraged by this, I begged an advance copy of the BBC's new film of *Romeo and Juliet*, the play for my Shakespeare course. I put notices about the showing around the faculty building, but not one of my colleagues came, including the Shakespeare specialists. Perhaps it risked some "loss of face" to join a student class.

One interesting fact emerged from the use of these visual aids. From time to time I gave tests: questions requiring only the briefest answer. The results were mostly lamentable. But any question based on a slide received a correct answer from nearly the whole class. The learning of written Japanese develops an exceptionally good visual memory.

My curriculum at Doshisha had one other dimension. I was among the few senior professors permitted to teach graduate students. I was to give one lecture a week to the senior graduate class. My opening lecture, where I hoped to generate a discussion on the nature of English literature, was not a success. University students in Japan, at all levels, do not like to speak before the rest of the class, and it is unkind to force them. In ignorance, I had thought that the graduate students would have overcome this shyness, but their tight-lipped silence proved me wrong. Toward the close of the class, I made a quick decision. I told the fifteen students that in place of the class, I would offer each of them the chance to experience the Oxford tutorial system, with a private tutorial of one hour each week, allowing them to explore subjects of personal interest.

Five students dropped out and ten signed



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on. My colleagues, who already suspected that I was eccentric, now had evidence that I was mad. I had, in effect, swapped one class for ten. How wrong they were. That decision transformed my two years at Doshisha and resulted in lasting friendships, and godchildren into the bargain. But if it was an experience for me, it was certainly one for them, and not an easy one. It took weeks to persuade them to express opinions. They would come to their tutorial, bursting with quotations from well-known authorities on their chosen author. When I shrugged off this critical display and said, "But what do *you* think?" for a time they were speechless. But you cannot break the educational mold of a lifetime in a few weeks. I shall never know how much I succeeded in teaching them, but I know that they taught me far more about Japan. It was an educational experience for all of us—exactly what a good teaching relationship should be. And it must be said for Doshisha that they allowed me to conduct all my classes in the way I wished, without a single restriction.

All my experience of Japanese education—which includes the complaints of many parents and teachers—leaves me with the feeling that among the advanced nations, the Japanese are the most literate and numerate people in the world—and the worst educated, in the liberal meaning of that word. Equally, I believe that they are as a race innately intelligent and creative. Sadly, their talents are too often suppressed or destroyed by their education.

I once organized a design seminar for Japanese knitting experts with a friend who was head of the textile department at the Royal College of Art in London. It was a revelation. The work the students brought with them was technically perfect but their design sense clearly inhibited. The first day was difficult, as we struggled to free them from their rigid approach. That evening we discussed our failure, and Roger Nicholson suggested that we free their minds through some novel experience that would liberate their imaginative powers, which we were certain existed.

The next morning Roger told these twenty respectable Japanese ladies that they were to go out into the neighboring streets and to collect anything they saw lying around, which they could bring back and make up into collages, which would form the basis for original knitting designs. After some initial distress—and probably distaste—they set out. They returned with bulging plastic sacks, and were quickly at work—loving it—and they created ingenious and original designs that were soon transformed into marvelous examples of what was then called "fashion knitting." By turning them into "rag-pickers," we had shocked them out of their inhibiting patterns of Japanese thought.

My first year at Doshisha brought an additional experience of Kyoto life. Through that system of introductions that is essential to Japanese society, I went to live at Chotoku-in, the humblest sub-temple in the complex of Shokoku-ji, one of the five great Zen temples of Kyoto, and, conveniently, just behind the main campus of Doshisha. I had once undergone some Zen training in a large monastery near Yokohama, but here—mercifully—I was a pampered lodger. Ogata-san, my saintly landlady, had lost her priestly husband seven years before, and now her elder son was priest of the temple, though apart from conducting the services, it was his mother who remained very much in charge—of the temple and me! Ogata-san exemplified all that is kind and generous in the Japanese. Initially, I felt a little restrained by the aura of the temple, until she said to me, "Please relax. This is your home."

In these large temples, each sub-temple has a burial ground. The priest makes his basic living by conducting the many memorial services for the souls of the departed in his care. The relatives would come to the temple, attend a short service, be served refreshments by Ogata-san, and pay the necessary fee. Some priests—the immaculate garden and new paintwork of our neighboring sub-temple suggested the wealth of its master calligrapher—supplement their incomes as artists, by teaching, or running private sessions of Zen meditation. Our young priest was shy and a scholar. He preferred to spend his time cataloging the neglected documents still hidden away in many Kyoto temples. He was also the master of ceremonies for the main temple, because he was the only priest who could read the Chinese liturgy.

There was nothing solemn about life in Chotoku-in. My study was separated from the temple by a thin sliding *fushima*, and Ogata-san would ask me to keep my radio turned down when a service was due. I usually turned it off and sat idly, enjoying the chanting of the



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sutra, punctuated by the ringing note of the gong. But mostly, the music of the temple was the sound of the family's television set and the general bustle of Ogata-san as she brought me fresh flower arrangements or trays laden with her excellent vegetarian dishes, which were not a part of my tenancy, but the overflowing of her kindness. It was a most pleasing mixture of the sacred and the domestic.

There are some fifteen hundred Buddhist temples in Kyoto and a further two hundred Shinto shrines. Their overwhelming presence leads many visitors—and some Japanese—to think that the Japanese are a religious people, deeply influenced by these two wholly different religions. That both can be practiced together by everyone suggests that neither is theologically demanding.

Chotoku-in was run like a family business, with the young priest a reluctant successor to his father. In medieval times, Buddhist temples practiced good works, supporting the poor and even providing the first public bathhouses in Japan; one remains at Tofuku-ji temple in southern Kyoto. But the Buddhist hierarchy was for a long time at odds with the government, and eventually it was relegated to the single task of looking after the dead. The normal pattern is a Shinto wedding and a Buddhist funeral, though it is possible to have a Buddhist, even a Zen, wedding.

My last memory of Kyoto is a recent and a very personal one, but since it illustrates all that is best in Japanese life, it may counterbalance some of my criticisms. I am married to a Japanese woman, and not long ago we had a child. Our daughter was born a month premature in a private clinic and was taken immediately to the Kyoto Prefectural Hospital, which has an infant intensive care unit. Our daughter's only problem was her low weight, which required her heart and temperature to be monitored until she gained enough weight to stabilize these conditions. There was no anxiety involved, so I was free to enjoy my daily visits to the unit for the next five weeks.

The intensive care unit was large and its staff and equipment equally impressive, with more than twenty-five incubators, besides what they nicely called the "hardening-off room," where babies from the incubators were prepared for the outside world. There was a doctor present all the time, and twenty-seven nurses worked in three eight-hour shifts. Walking around the hospital, I became convinced that all the prettiest nurses had been selected to work in the unit, not for the benefit of visiting fathers, but to create the most charming atmosphere for the babies. Most certainly, the atmosphere was delightful. Each incubator was hung with pretty origami toys, made by the nurses, whose meticulous efficiency was motivated by their maternal feelings for their patients. And when the babies left, there must occasionally have been a heavy heart. Perhaps because of this, the nurses were not meant to visit a baby's home. As I know, it was a rule not always kept.

Once, an unctuous English academic, a professional Japanologist, not an amateur like me, asked me in a rather patronizing tone, "And what has sustained your interest in Japan all these years?" With some mischief but also a good deal of truth, I replied, "The women, and they continue to sustain it." As I had intended, he took it the wrong way and turned his back before I could enlarge on the subject. But as I sat for many hours in the intensive care unit, watching the nurses and talking to them, I was constantly reminded of the special qualities of Japanese women, who seem to me the heart and soul of Japan.

During my twenty-seven years around Japan, I have never gotten to know one Japanese man really well, but I have had a large number of women friends of every age and kind. Most men are socially paralyzed by their concern with "face" and overburdened with the obligations of their working life. As an occasional consultant, I have worked closely with teams of men in various Japanese companies, sometimes for some years. I felt I had made some solid friendships, but the moment I ceased to be a member of the company *group*, I was dropped. In contrast, during the same period, I do not think I have lost touch with one woman friend.

The qualities I admire in Japanese women—warmth, loyalty, strength, competence, flexibility—were all evident in the nurses. I do not intend to sentimentalize the unit. The nurses were fighting to save the tiny scraps of humanity in some of the incubators. As the professor of the unit once said to me, "I sometimes think our technology is getting ahead of our common sense." It could have been a grim place, but the nurses' humanity and endless good humor softened the sharp edges of reality in a uniquely Japanese way, without sacrificing an iota of efficiency.



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They also showed their flexibility in coping with me. I confess that my daughter and I tended to be the center of attention. Miki looked very European, and not even a Japanese nurse can resist that novelty. And not only was I the only father who visited so regularly, but I was discovered to be the oldest father in the unit's records. I was also obviously no great respecter of rules and regulations. I could not remember the Japanese names of all the babies, so I started giving them nicknames. One little boy had an unusually square head, and I named him "Mr. Box." At first, the nurses were shocked. "How severe you are," they chorused in a typical Japanese reaction: most things I say are considered "severe" in Japan. But when I arrived the next day, a nurse passed me and without pause said, "Mr. Box is better today," and Mr. Box he remained until he left.

Maintaining the unit must have cost a great deal, and this lengthy stay could have involved us in a huge bill. However, under Japanese law, the care is free if the ministry of health decides that the premature birth constituted an emergency. We made the necessary application and waited, somewhat anxiously. On the last day, we were given a paper releasing us from the payment of some $16,000. Pinned to this generous waiver was a smaller piece of paper: the bill for diapers: $136.00! I laughed, with relief, at that gentle way the Japanese have of reminding you of your good fortune. I have enjoyed a great deal of that during my years in Kyoto.



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# *Guardian Angels*

JEAN BURDEN

I choose to believe in them.
I like to think they hang around
in shadows, listening for our
whispers of distress, the ticktock
of danger, overhearing our fears.

Perhaps they live in that patch of air
between the visible and invisible
where one can only catch a glimpse out
of the corner of one's eye. A blowing
leaf or hummingbird might look the same.

Angels answer to whatever name we give them.
I call mine "Martin." Where it came from
I do not know, but when I speak those
syllables aloud, the bougainvillea
rustles with his wings.

He tells me angels do not concern themselves
with pestilence or flood, but defend
against the weathers of the soul. (But do
you save the skeptics as well as the devout?
I ask. What if I am not sure
about the absolutes that make you shine?)

*Let them go. More real than myths and avatars*
*is the daily resurrection of the sun,*
*the sacraments between the stars, the winter*
*moss underneath the snow. If you have*
*faith in courage even when you are not always*
*brave . . . remember, I guard against despair,*
*not loss.*

And the pine tree shivers with his love.

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# Academicians All

## A Fragment of Cultural History

ARTHUR SCHLESINGER, JR.

Probably more Americans are aware of the Académie Française than of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, not that either body is precisely a household word. Still our own national cultural institution, duly chartered by Congress, has enlisted much of the republic's artistic talent over the last century; and those interested in the arts might be interested in the basic change it has recently undergone.

In the spring of 1993 what had long been a bicameral body, the American Academy *and* the National Institute of Arts and Letters, celebrated the end of the internal division that had plagued the organization for nearly ninety years. The original creation and subsequent abolition of an upper and lower house in an institution dedicated to the arts make an instructive story—a story that tells us a good deal about the vicissitudes of American literary life over the last century.

At the annual ceremonial held last spring in the imposing building incongruously located at the corner of Broadway and West 155th Street in upper New York, two at long last became one; bicameralism yielded to amalgamation; the double bill gave way to the single feature; duality surrendered to merger. After decades of often angry controversy, the American Academy was transformed into a unitary body in which all at last are equal members.

The road to equality and union had been far from tranquil. The venerable institution, for all its stately exterior, had had its share of internal controversy. Its members, after all, were writers and artists and composers and architects: that is to say, arrant individualists. Argument is an organic part of the institution's history—a history that goes back to the last years of the nineteenth century.

The National Institute of Arts and Letters, as it was known for many years, was founded in 1898. By 1904 it had grown to its stipulated limit of 250 members. While America's population tripled in the years after 1904, the Institute steadfastly clung to the 250-member limit, presumably on the assumption that the increase in population had not been matched by any corresponding increase in the pool of artistic and literary talent.

Early on, some felt that even 250 members constituted too large a body to make a public impression in the high style of the Académie Française. The creation of an elite class among the membership, the composer Edward MacDowell suggested in 1904, might strengthen the Institute's appeal, especially to philanthropists inclined to contribute toward an endowment. "In order," the members resolved, "to make the Institute more efficient in carrying out the purpose for which it was organized, the protection and furtherance of literature and the arts, and to give greater definiteness to its work," there should be organized an Academy of Arts and Letters composed of thirty eminent persons to be chosen from the Institute. The new body was formally established on April 23, 1904. By 1908 the inner circle's stipulated membership was raised to

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50; this limit, too, resisted the mighty population growth of the years since.

The first seven academicians were, in order of election, William Dean Howells, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Edmund Clarence Stedman, John LaFarge, Mark Twain, John Hay, and Edward MacDowell. Mark Twain happily managed to slip in, even if only as number five, and Saint-Gaudens, Howells, and MacDowell also certainly merited election. But other names revealed the weakness for the genteel tradition that marked the Academy's first forty years. Henry James and Henry Adams, whom we today would rank above most of the first seven, only made the second seven, along with Theodore Roosevelt.

When the first fifty were completed, one woman was on the list. Julia Ward Howe, at the age of eighty-nine, came in forty-first, one place ahead of the president of Princeton, Woodrow Wilson. However, as Malcolm Cowley later put it, the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" was elected not as a woman but "as a national institution."

"Did it ever occur to you," Henry Adams wrote Robert Underwood Johnson, the secretary of the Academy, "that if we put Julia Ward Howe on our membership, we are subject to much criticism for neglecting other women? I do not see how we justify omitting Edith Wharton, for example, and I've no doubt that a dozen more would claim much higher literary credit than Mrs. Howe can claim."

Adams wrote to no avail. For years after Mrs. Howe's death in 1910, the old guard succeeded in excluding women from both bodies. In 1918 Mrs. Wharton, Margaret Deland, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman all received enough votes for election; but the Institute members at the annual meeting tabled a motion permitting the admission of women. By 1923 a clear majority of the membership favored the election of women, but the president, Maurice Francis Egan, a literature professor and occasional diplomat, joined the Institute's Council in refusing to submit the names of women as candidates for election at the annual meeting.

Egan died in 1924, and the Institute's lawyer advised his successor that there was nothing in the by-laws to prohibit the election of women. At last in 1926 Edith Wharton was elected to the Institute, along with Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Margaret Deland, and Agnes Repplier. Willa Cather did not make it until 1929. The next year, a long twenty years after Henry Adams's protest, Mrs. Wharton finally achieved the Academy—an honor for which Willa Cather had to wait till 1938. Things have perhaps improved insufficiently since. At last count there were only six women out of fifty members in the Academy, 44 out of 250 in the Institute.

Not everyone was gratified by the creation of the Academy. William James, elected three months after his younger brother, not only declined the Academy but seized the opportunity to resign from the Institute as well. "As a preacher against vanities," he explained, he could not justify joining an organization like the Academy that had been set up "for the mere purpose of distinguishing certain individuals (with their own connivance) and enabling them to say to the world at large 'we are in and you are out.'" In a passage that subsequently gave rise to much exegetical controversy, he also noted that his "younger and shallower and vainer brother is already in the Academy." If he were in the Academy too, "the other families represented might think the James influence too rank and strong."

What some later members of the Institute regarded as typical Jamesian family banter, others took more darkly. Leon Edel, not only a champion of Henry James but a disciple of Sigmund Freud, detected "hidden animus" in what Jacques Barzun, a champion of William James, saw as "mock insults to express strong affection." "Deep psychologizing on this frail topic," Barzun added, "is itself shallow and vain." Lionel Trilling supported Barzun, and, for what it is worth, I must confess my own sympathy with the Barzun reading.

Despite William James's preachments against vanities, most Institute members readily succumbed when tapped. The distinction between the waiting club and the final club was not, however, clear to all. Every few years members of the Institute—on one occasion, Thomas Mann—would reply in some surprise to notification of election to the Academy by saying that they thought they were members already. The Academy itself, formed as it was of the elders and dominated by Nicholas Murray Butler and Robert Underwood Johnson—this was the era of the triple-barreled name—became by the 1920s the citadel of traditionalism, determined to save the arts in America from the corruptions of modernism.

The battle between the ancients and mod-



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erns, as Malcolm Cowley later described it, soon grew edgy and cantankerous. Henry Mencken made the Academy a favorite butt of his jokes, and Sinclair Lewis condemned the compulsion he thought the two bodies "put upon writers to become safe, polite, obedient, and sterile." Lewis brusquely refused election to the Institute, and, accepting the Nobel Prize in Stockholm in 1930, launched a gratuitous attack on the Academy. It "does not represent literary America today," the author of *Main Street* said; "it represents only Henry Wadsworth Longfellow." Ezra Pound, while accepting election, ungratefully called the Institute "a joke" and fulminated against "the unspeakably low state of American culture . . . during the dominence [*sic*] of W. D. Howells and the still unjailed N. M. Butler." Pound then was still unjailed himself.

In 1933, to everyone's surprise, Sinclair Lewis reversed field and accepted membership in the Institute and then, four years later, in the Academy. Robert Underwood Johnson did his damnedest to keep Lewis out of the Academy and wrote more than forty letters opposing Mencken's election to the Institute. He need not have feared: the sage of Baltimore had not the slightest intention of accepting. But the genteel tradition kept losing ground. During the 1930s Lewis and Pound were joined in the Institute by such deplorable modernists as Faulkner, Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, Steinbeck, Sandburg, and Jeffers.

The ancients finally gave up on the Institute as irretrievably lost to the enemy and retreated to their stronghold in the Academy. In 1940 they made their last stand and proposed a change in the by-laws that would empower the Academy to elect whomever it wished, no longer restricting its choice to persons already in the Institute. The supposition was that they intended to elect General Pershing. But a majority in the Academy itself, rallied by Walter Damrosch, defeated the proposed amendment.

The genteel tradition that had so long made the Academy/Institute the bulwark of conventionality now evaporated. By the 1980s not only Norman Mailer but Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, not only Willem de Kooning but Cy Twombly and Roy Lichtenstein, not only Elliott Carter but John Cage were all in the Institute. What would Robert Underwood Johnson and Nicholas Murray Butler have made of that?

In the meantime, the Institute and the Academy settled for a season into placid coexistence. By the mid-sixties, however, members began to wonder whether continued separation made much sense. In 1966, George Kennan, then president of the Institute, appointed a committee to take a look at the question. The next year the committee reported that in principle unification would be desirable for several reasons. It would simplify administration, foster better understanding on the part of the public, strengthen the institution's influence on national arts policy, and expedite the search for financial support.

In 1976 the two bodies became a single legal and financial entity. But this strictly managerial reform did not alter the two tiers of prestige inside the Academy/Institute—a structure that an increasing number of members found objectionable. Elevation from one body to the other, Lewis Mumford said in 1970, was "an invidious and meaningless distinction." Jacques Barzun, Henry Steele Commager, William Schuman, Barbara Tuchman, and others joined Kennan in the movement for a single organization.

The argument continued sporadically throughout the decade. In 1979 Barbara Tuchman, in a caustic statement signed by a dozen other Academicians, said that the Academy performed no separate or distinct function "beyond an agreeable polishing of egos." Election was "often erratic, haphazard, and as much the product of friendship as of merit. . . . The invidious and divisive business of raising some to superior distinction, for which the criteria are so inexact, [should] be abandoned." A single body, the Tuchman manifesto concluded, "would be better recognized and understood as representing the best in American arts and letters, and within its own walls would generate a more united feeling among its members."

But the amalgamation project provoked vigorous opposition, especially among those elders already ensconced in the Academy. Ironically, Malcolm Cowley, who had defined the fight of 1940 as between the ancients and the moderns and had himself supported the moderns, now led the ancients in the battle against the new heresy. Responding to the Tuchman statement, Cowley, backed by twenty-



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one Academicians, rejected the idea that election to the Academy was "invidious." This word, he said, implied that election was "faintly immoral when judged by the ethics of an egalitarian democracy. But all honors are invidious. . . . In that sense the Institute is also invidious, and on a larger scale. Should we avoid the implied charge of elitism by abolishing both institutions?" As for polishing egos, "would it be morally better to neglect or abrade them?" Election to the Academy, Cowley insisted, was a very high honor. "The Academy has its own function in the world of art, one which it now seems foolish to surrender."

George Kennan spoke for many when he observed that, while he personally favored merger, the change should not be jammed down the throats of a sizable minority. "Either there is a strong and enthusiastic support or else we shouldn't do it at all." For this reason, the merger question, though still discussed intermittently and often irritably, went without resolution for yet another decade. As late as 1989, a straw vote at an Academy meeting came out 7 to 6 in favor of the status quo. In 1990 another Academy meeting decided that the matter could be safely postponed for several more years. Members talked vaguely of action in the early twenty-first century.

Then in this decade the climate suddenly changed—possibly as part, if I may be indulged, of the changing cycles of American politics. On May 15, 1991, Jack Levine, the Academy's new chancellor, reopened the question in an eloquent intervention. Unification all at once appeared as an idea whose time had come. At the next meeting, in December 1991, a resolution was placed before the Academy's membership: "That in the interest of removing confusing and inappropriate distinctions within our fellowship and of making our organization more intelligible to the media at home and our counterparts abroad, members of the Institute shall be invited to join the Academy, ways and means to be worked out by an executive committee of the Academy."

A clear majority of the Academy at the meeting voted to submit the resolution to the entire membership by postal ballot—even though, as John Kenneth Galbraith commented, the reform, which he otherwise favored, had "one grievous disadvantage in that it would rob us of one of the most persistent topics of conversation that we have had over the last half-century." Thirty-nine out of forty-nine Academicians returned their ballots—30 voting for merger, 9 opposed. To no one's surprise, the Institute promptly accepted the invitation by a vote of 145 to 4. And so, on the brink of the twenty-first century, the Institute disappeared into the Academy, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters entered a new era.

It was the culmination of a long and sometimes troubled journey. If objections remained, the objectors were in a tiny minority, and even they were ready to hearken to the words of the Psalmist: "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity."



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# Remembering Criticism

JOHN W. ALDRIDGE

Back in the forties and through most of the fifties, if you were young, intellectual, and passionately bookish, the chances were that you aspired to become, not a poet or novelist, but a literary critic. Today such an ambition must seem mysterious, even quaintly perverse, but at the time it was perfectly understandable. For that was a period when American criticism, for the first and undoubtedly for the last time in its history, was considered by many to be the noblest of possible pursuits, more prestigious and authoritative even than the important works it evaluated. In fact, the more prominent critics of those years were viewed —at least by their worshipful disciples—as iconic giants, gifted with prodigious knowledge, seemingly fluent in ancient Greek and Latin, conversant with all the major literatures of the Western world, and speaking with golden, if often enchantingly incomprehensible, tongues about the arcane intricacies of literary texts.

That of course was during the time of the massive flowering of the so-called New Criticism, the age of R. P. Blackmur, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Kenneth Burke, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren, with Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, and Malcolm Cowley serving as mentors in the less technical field of socio-historical criticism and carrying forward the practical business of evaluating current as well as classic literary works.

But what gave these critics their special authority was that they were engaged in performing perhaps the most important labor of literary enlightenment undertaken in this century—that of introducing the reading audience to the new modernist movement and educating that audience in how to read and understand the difficult works of the major modernist writers.

From the fair number of such works produced during the twenties and thirties, Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses* were chosen because of their unusual difficulty as the obligatory texts most urgently requiring explication before they could be understood. In campus dormitories across the country, secret cells of young critical acolytes labored to decipher the meanings hidden in these monumental puzzlements (Who, God help us, is the Hanged Man, the man with three staves, Madame Sosostris, the lovely girl in the hyacinth garden? What, in the name of creation, is the Agenbite of Inwit?), their fevered annotations so thick on the page that the printed words barely showed through.

Then there were the high priests of criticism whose books and essays illuminated the texts of the modernist saints: Wilson and Harry Levin on Joyce; Brooks on *The Waste Land*; Blackmur on the first American modernist, Henry James; Warren and Cowley on Hemingway and Faulkner; Trilling on Freud. Certain critical books became themselves scriptures, their insights, in Mary McCarthy's pungent phrase, "the sacred droppings of holy birds." Wilson's *Axel's Castle* and Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* among a few others, belonged to this category, and whole long passages from them were reverentially committed to memory by aspiring critics.

In some universities there were special programs considered at the time rather renegade that were designed to promote the teachings of the New Criticism. The School of Letters, located first at Kenyon College, then at Indiana University, functioned as the critical

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equivalent of the summer writers conference of today, attracting, instead of apprentice poets and fiction writers, scores of student critics who sat at the feet of their distinguished mentors and learned from them how to recognize the intentional fallacy, the affective fallacy, the fallacy of imitative form, the language of irony and paradox, pure and impure poetry, the enabling act of criticism. At the Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism at Princeton during the fifties, R. P. Blackmur, his eternal cigarette held between third and fourth fingers like a tiny scepter, reigned over an intellectual kingdom that was mighty in prestige and influence. Each lecturer in the program was required to present, before a scrupulously selected audience, a polished and publishable essay every week for six weeks, and all lectures were followed by an hour of fierce discussion followed by some of the fiercest alcoholic parties ever to defile the sacred groves of academe. Yet in spite of the cruel demands on mind and body, the seminars attracted participants and guests on the order of Wilson, Tate, V. S. Pritchett, Hannah Arendt, Mark Schorer, Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe, John Berryman, Erich Auerbach, Frances Ferguson, and Jacques Maritain.

In an only slightly less bibulous atmosphere at the University of Vermont, some of the same Princeton notables taught short summer courses in the critical analysis of poetry, the work of the later and vastly better Yeats, Pound's *Cantos*, *Ulysses*, the poems of the later and lesser Eliot, and the last and best novels of Henry James. On one unforgettable evening Blackmur presented as a public lecture the most recondite essay he or very probably anyone else ever wrote, his "Between the Numen and the Moha." The audience, composed of townspeople, farmers, faculty, and students, sat through it in deeply respectful bafflement, understanding not a word, yet somehow conscious that they were witnessing a literary event of quite awesome dimension.

And indeed they were, for Blackmur was one of the most complicated and subtle minds of a critical movement founded on a passionate belief in the absolute importance of literature and driven by an effort to define precisely the qualities that made it important. What mattered most was the fineness of a writer's aesthetic impression of life, and the more complex the impression the better. At its most sophisticated it was a criticism that seemed to be searching for a kind of unified field theory of literature in which the harmonious connectedness of all the elements of a work—its imagery, its narrative action, the rhetoric of its language—was the ultimate test of excellence.

This effort to formulate new standards by which literature could be judged became in those years the motive power of a major critical industry not only in the universities but to some real extent in the literary marketplace as well. The result was that for a fairly long time criticism had an existence and a voice as an instructor of public taste that today one must find remarkable. Critics published their essays and reviews not only in professional journals like the *Kenyon*, *Sewanee*, and *Partisan* reviews but also in the *New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, and the *Nation*, where they often debated with one another over literary issues and where, surprisingly enough, their views were often contested by readers. Edmund Wilson's long career, during which he wrote many highly readable books and reviewed for some of the most influential nonacademic periodicals, became a symbol of the power of an important critic to address that large audience of general readers who simply wanted to learn what the good new books were and how to think about them.

Perhaps because many of the best critics of the time were, like Wilson, more visible and vocal than any critic is today, some of them achieved the status of minor public personages and had genuine influence in the cultural life both in this country and abroad. Blackmur was appointed as a sort of roving literary ambassador by the Rockefeller Foundation and sent on lecture tours throughout Europe, Africa, and the Far East. Cleanth Brooks was honored by the state department with a prestigious appointment as cultural attaché at the American embassy in London. Malcolm Cowley, who wrote significant critical studies of his literary contemporaries as well as *Exile's Return*, served for years as president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a position usually occupied by a distinguished creative artist. Allen Tate lectured widely in this country and in Europe. Lionel Trilling was a major figure in the intellectual life of New York and beyond. He, too, lectured widely and even made appearances, as did Tate, on such popular cultural radio talk



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shows as "Invitation to Learning." The man of letters was in a modest way a figure of public authority. And when Tate wrote an essay called "The Man of Letters in the Modern World," he took it for granted that such a man indeed had a place and a function of some importance in the modern world.

Clearly, all that belongs now to history. In a curious way, what brought the critical movement of the forties and fifties to an end was success—at least of a certain kind. The great majority of the young disciples of Blackmur, Tate, and the others grew up to become not practicing critics but professors of English, and there in the academy they began to teach the critical principles they had so worshipfully learned from their mentors. Soon the formerly innovative analytical methods of the New Criticism became established as the conventional classroom procedures for studying poems and novels, a process hastened by the appearance of such textbooks as *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, both edited by mentors Brooks and Warren.

Inevitably, what began to happen was that the textual analysis of such hoary old hieroglyphs as *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, once at the frontiers of new and exciting revelation, became part of a routine academic game of Trivial Pursuit. Interpretation, no matter how outlandish, became an end in itself and frequently obscured or burlesqued the complex life of the work under scrutiny. Thus, with hopeful ingenuity unsupported by intelligence, Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* could be viewed in one dimension as a figure representing Jehovah, with Buck Mulligan playing the role of Satan, and Stephen Dedalus recast for a walk-on as the young Jesus Christ. For a time it seemed that every avid English major had been issued a little rubber hammer with which to tap suspect metaphors to see if they would knee-jerk into full-fledged symbols.

In short, what had once been a critical movement capable of offering seminal insights into the meaning and value of classic modernist literature had collapsed so completely into self-parody that it was no longer capable of making the one crucial move that might have prolonged its life. It could not find the vitality to do for contemporary literature what it had so brilliantly done for modernism. It therefore remains a body of antique methodology entombed in its historical period, while a still newer criticism has sought to grow beyond the cramped confines of the purely explicatory approach.

In pursuit of this endeavor, at least two highly visible developments of the last ten or fifteen years have provided evidence that criticism has become more and more completely an academic exercise, heavily preoccupied with abstruse theories about language and history and steadily less concerned with artistic values. Partly because of the influence of such European theorists as Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, and Jacques Derrida, some American academics have embraced with evident relief the view that literary texts, when sufficiently deconstructed, contain such an infinite number of potential and often contradictory meanings that interpretation is impossible and the basis for aesthetic evaluation cannot reasonably be said to exist. To those who teach literature but have never really liked it very much, this must have come as very welcome news. For through such deconstruction, literature comes to mean everything or nothing, while criticism self-destructs as an interpretive instrument.

In another and closely related development, literary works belonging mostly to the past are viewed as political statements in which women and racial minorities are revealed to be the oppressed victims of a rigidly hierarchical social system dominated by the imperialist values of dead white males. In their undoubtedly well-intentioned effort to redress past inequities and deconstruct the white male literary canon, the proponents of this view are concerned not with questions of artistic quality or the other meanings beyond the political that may be found in the canonized works. For them, everything is political, even the critical standards by which quality is assessed.

With so many of our best-educated critical minds closeted together in fevered university debates over such issues, the practical business of literary production goes on largely unsupervised except by book reviewers who, however intelligent, are very seldom literary critics. The result is that the vital and vitalizing relationship between criticism and the living literature is not maintained, and writers and readers alike pay for its loss. Creative writers are in need of informed critical evaluation, however unhappy they may from time to time be made by it. It is an instrument of mediation between them and their potential audiences,



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and it is the one dependable means by which their reputations are created and then sustained during those often lengthy intervals between the appearances of their books. Whether they were fully aware of it or not, there existed a strong symbiotic connection between critics like Wilson, Trilling, and Cowley and the writers they wrote about, and that connection exists scarcely at all among critics and writers today.

As long ago as 1928, in an essay called "The Critic Who Does Not Exist," Edmund Wilson made the following not quite prophetic statement: "There has not been a single American critic who regularly occupies himself in an authoritative way with contemporary literature." He then went on to enumerate some of the benefits certain writers might enjoy if such a critic did exist, and, with a modesty rare for him, he declined to mention his own very considerable qualifications for the role.

But clearly his observation applies only partly to our situation today. There are of course some very competent critics now at work on contemporary literature. A few may even be writing about it in an authoritative way. But neither their concerns nor, for that matter, those expressed by contemporary writers in their poetry and fiction have a part in the intellectual debates going forward in the universities. In short, the most energetic and highly publicized criticism now being done has left almost entirely out of account questions of the nature and quality of our current literature.

There are also other problems peculiar to the present situation that Wilson would probably have found very difficult to understand, if only because they did not exist in 1928. When he wrote in his essay about the contributions his ideal critic might make to the health of contemporary literature, he took it for granted, with a certitude that must now seem naïve, that the critic's views would have genuine influence not only on how writers went about their work ("And might not a critic who enjoyed [John Howard] Lawson's wit . . . have been of some service in discouraging his bathos and his bad rhetoric?") but how their work was received by the reading public, as if such close communication from critic to writer to reader should and could occur.

But of course Wilson had good reason for believing that it could, or at least the literary conditions of the time were such that he could easily have accepted the possibility without question. For even that early in his career he already had a working relationship with three magazines that undoubtedly provided him with a strong sense of connection both with writers and with the reading public. In 1920, at the age of twenty-five, he became managing editor of *Vanity Fair*, and a year later he assumed the same position at the *New Republic*. He also was an early contributor to *The New Yorker* before becoming in 1944 its regular book critic, a post in which he ultimately achieved his greatest fame and influence. In addition, he wrote regularly for *The Dial*, *Bookman*, and the *Nation*.

At the same time and well into the fifties there existed several members of a now nearly extinct breed of regular book columnists, writers on the order of Stuart P. Sherman, Clifton Fadiman, and Burton Rascoe, whose commentaries, however journalistic they mostly were, helped to create a climate in which the assessment of new literary work became a routine part of the journalistic enterprise and gave some real legitimacy to the perception that there existed a genuine and attentive reading audience who could be expected to respond to clearly written discussions of books.

Today, with academic criticism obsessed with politics and literary theory and indifferent to contemporary work virtually to the point of open disdain, there has been a marked shrinkage of the arena of critical discourse at every level. The new incarnations of *Vanity Fair*, the *New Republic*, and *The New Yorker* do not provide a medium for sustained critical commentary but offer only token reviews, mostly of nonfiction, that are written, as a rule, by a variety of people, almost as if to make certain that no one voice will be heard often enough to become noticeable or truly persuasive.

The solid center of literary community, the existence of which Wilson appears to have taken for granted and which made possible his kind of public critic, has obviously not held, and something approaching mere anarchy has resulted. The center over the years has disintegrated into numerous bits and pieces of provisional and nomadic community, usually related to the dozens of scattered, small-circulation journals that have little or no relation to or influence upon one another and



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that are devoted mainly to the publication of new poetry and fiction but scarcely at all to critical commentary on new poetry and fiction.

If present-day equivalents of Wilson's ideal critic do in fact exist, the broad-based and cohesive medium through which they might achieve wide influence and the kind of authority Wilson had in mind is clearly no longer available to them—and we are all made the poorer by its absence.

# *The Sonneteer*

BILLY COLLINS

Others may write you long letters,
one thin, blue page after another,
the loops and swirls of their script
falling from your lap to the marble floor;
and still others will settle next to you
on a brocaded couch and talk long into the night.
But I have only these lines to hook your attention,
only so many syllables to loosen your stays.

I want you to put down the letter, rise
from the couch and open the door of this poem.
I want you to step into the small sunny room
where I am always waiting, down on my knees,
my eyes uplifted, my arms full of adjectives,
my heart maintaining its steady iambic beat.

✪ BILLY COLLINS is a professor of English at Lehman College (CUNY). *Questions About Angels* is his latest collection of poems.



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# *Second Birth*

*(for Andrew Schenck, January 7, 1941–February 19, 1992)*

JOYCE S. BROWN

> *The glory of the celestial body is one, and the glory of the terrestrial body is another.*
>
> —I Corinthians 15:40

If I could choose a death
to wear like evening clothes,

I'd take yours, Andrew,
and the life before it:

young man in tails drawing his baton
like a wand through symphonies by Brahms,

stirring a stage full of players,
pulling music from a top hat. So young

to find in your closet a winding sheet
in autumn colors, whitening by winter.

Wrapped in the thin garment, you pull
your family close for warmth.

Your wife smooths the bedclothes,
reads psalms to you, sings hymns,

while your ear tracks high-pitched
harmonies. You float like ash

exclaiming as you die, "Good things
are happening!" The ghost of Brahms

reaches through the ether, grasps you
like a midwife, turns you into music—

your second birth a song for high voice
I may one day learn to sing.

✪ JOYCE S. BROWN teaches in the writing program at Johns Hopkins University. Her poems have appeared in *Yankee*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Commonweal*, and other journals.



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# The Fate of a Story

PETER SHAW

In the 1980s the academic interpretation of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd,* a short novel that had inspired a certain amount of debate over the years, shifted almost entirely to the view that the story actually means the opposite of what it says. No scholarly discovery nor any new critical insight justified this remarkable turnabout. Instead, the dubious side in a debate triumphed by default as defenders of a commonsensical understanding all but disappeared from the scene. The reasons for this outcome had less to do with literary analysis than with culture and politics. For at issue among the critics was not so much Melville's story as its implications about the power of the state.

In *Billy Budd,* an ingenuous young sailor aboard a British man-of-war must be hanged when he strikes and kills an officer who has brought false witness against him. The contrary-to-commonsense reading holds that Billy Budd did not have to die. He was inadvisedly hurried to his death by the ship's captain, Edward Vere, whose psychological pathology is said to be the real if not ostensible focus of the author's interest. Though the story makes it clear that Vere has no choice but to condemn Billy to death, critics, starting in the 1980s, routinely argued that Vere's application of the law is arbitrary and unnecessary, that it springs from twisted psychological motives, and that it reflects the inherent cruelty of his privileged class.

In contrast to the critics' emphasis on Billy's sentence, the story itself concentrates on the concatenation of circumstances surrounding that sentence. John Claggart, the master-at-arms who falsely accuses Billy of conspiring to mutiny, happens to be a rare example of the human capacity for pure malice. He is outraged at some impenetrable depth by Billy's ingenuous spirit. At the same time he is perhaps perversely attracted to Billy's beauty—and made all the more resentful for being so.

Billy's very innocence tells against him in the peculiarly loaded circumstances of the tragedy. For his shock at Claggart's accusation renders him incapable of refuting it. As for the third main actor, Captain Vere, his very insight into the likelihood that Claggart is lying contributes to the disaster. Reasonably enough, he acts to expose Claggart by ordering that he repeat his charge directly to Billy. What Vere cannot know, however, is that Billy has a stutter, that it will overcome him under the shock of the unexpected accusation, that in his frustration he will convulsively strike out at his false accuser, and that the blow will prove fatal when Claggart topples over and strikes his head on the deck.

Appalled, Captain Vere exclaims: "Struck by an angel of God. And yet the angel must hang." His words express the realization that Billy's killing blow stemmed from a rare, radical innocence, but that this kind of innocence cannot preserve him from punishment. In the first place, Billy's deed, like Claggart's accusation, forces Vere to treat the threat of mutiny seriously. The most extensive mutinies in British naval history have just been put down. England is at war with France. There is no telling how a ship full of impressed men—Billy is one of these—will react in an engagement with the enemy: something that may take place at any moment. And so, perilously separated from the fleet as he is, Captain Vere decides that, lest any hint of vulnerability be conveyed to the men, Billy Budd, whose fate is sealed in any case, be hanged forthwith. The following morning Billy is duly hanged from the yard-

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arm, having first loyally pronounced the words, "God bless Captain Vere!" The Captain, gripped by the tragic circumstances, never forgets the incident and dies in battle with Billy Budd's name on his lips.

According to Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts in their introduction to *Billy Budd*, Melville, in a penciled note at the end of his manuscript, called it "a story not unwarranted by what sometimes happens in this incomprehensible world of ours—innocence and infirmity, spiritual depravity and fair repute." In this formulation Billy's "innocence" refers not only to the charge of mutiny of which he is not guilty but also to his youthfully uncorrupted character. The "infirmity" is Billy's incapacity to deal with duplicity and evil. Claggart's "spiritual depravity," in contrast, has not been incompatible with his having gained "fair repute" in his career as an officer. These "incongruous" elements—innocence traduced instead of triumphant and depravity going safely undetected—are treated so as to evoke an atmosphere of biblical allegory and tragic fate. Billy as innocence is bound for an almost Christ-like martyrdom. Claggart as Satanic evil will undermine Billy, whose aspect suggests Adam as well as Christ. Vere as a dutiful Abraham will be forced to sacrifice one of his sons.

Turning this scheme on its head, the academic critics make Captain Vere the villain in the tale. Because in their opinion he should not have had Billy hanged, *he*, instead of Claggart, is said to represent the depravity that can destroy innocence. The critics do not deny that Vere is treated sympathetically or that his actions are defended. After all, it is simply incontestable that Melville presents him as a man of admirable balance: brave but modest, firmly in control of his men without being overbearing, studious without being pedantic. But the critics argue that this presentation is actually ironic. They hold that the reader should judge Captain Vere, and judge him severely, by reversing the meaning of everything favorable said of him, and by taking literally everything unfavorable.

Until 1949 no such possibility occurred to either common readers or professional critics. Alike they experienced a tragic tale involving the radical evil of Claggart, the equally radical innocence of Billy, and Billy's philosophically suggestive imperfection—his stutter—bringing on a catastrophe. A thoughtful, sensitive Vere was caught in a tragic conundrum, and a quasi-religious transcendence of human categories was achieved by Billy in the moment of his death by hanging. Needless to say, dramatizers of the tale for the opera, theater, and movies had no inkling of any lurking irony: to have reversed the picture, changing heroes to villains and evident meanings into their opposites would have left their stagings without dramatic point.

On the other hand, *Billy Budd* is an admittedly difficult work to read. The aged Melville employed an intricately qualified phraseology every bit as involuted as the notorious late style employed by Henry James just a few years later. (Melville finished writing in 1891.) Not surprisingly, critics of the 1950s, taken up as they were with the study of irony and ambiguity, found in *Billy Budd* a rich occasion for speculation. One after another of Melville's qualified statements about and even criticisms of Captain Vere were first called to attention in that decade and proposed as indications of ironic authorial intent.

Something of a *Billy Budd* controversy developed and was prolonged thanks to the circumstances under which the work was written, published, and received. In his last years, Melville, having become a virtually forgotten figure, had taken to publishing himself privately. He died, in 1891, without preparing *Billy Budd* for the printer. In 1923 his confusingly penciled-over manuscript was published in a somewhat defective transcription that would later complicate criticism. In the meantime, *Billy Budd*'s philosophical tone struck its first readers, for whom the salient fact about Melville was his having been forgotten in old age, as a triumph over neglect. The previously rebellious Melville seemed to have "sailed into a mildness," as W. H. Auden phrased it in his poem "At Melville's Tomb," and to have left a final "testament of acceptance," as an early critic put it.

Later critics would refine this view by noting that Melville came not so much to accept fate supinely as, according to F. O. Matthiessen, to "respect necessity." He projected not so much a mild as "a harsh and difficult acceptance." Ignoring such nuances, though, other critics kept reacting against the passive implications of the earliest readings. Instead of being termed a "testament of acceptance," they argued, *Billy Budd* ought to be called a "testa-



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ment of resistance." The new phrase, among other things, contained the opinion that Melville remained the upbraider of destiny he had been in his youth. Since he supposedly carried forward his attitude into *Billy Budd* through ironic reversal of the apparent meaning, the anti-acceptance interpretation of that work is referred to either as the "resistance" or the "ironic" (sometimes "ironist") reading.

In 1962, in the midst of the controversy between the two readings, previous defective transcriptions of the confused *Billy Budd* manuscript were substantially improved by a scholarly edition. The most striking change was the removal of the story's preface. In this brief paragraph the significance of the "momentous" year in which the story takes place—1797—is laid out. The French Revolution, the paragraph states, had promised "the rectification of the Old World's hereditary wrongs"—wrongs the reader will soon witness in the impressment of Billy Budd and be reminded of when mention is made of the 1797 Nore and Spithead mutinies in the British navy. But then the paragraph goes on to say that "the [French] revolution regency as righter of wrongs itself became a wrongdoer, one more oppressive than the Kings." This authoritative opening statement disposes the reader to place the English, anti-revolutionary Vere on the side of right and to regard the existence of such practices as Billy's impressment as actually supporting rather than discrediting Vere's cause, inasmuch as they would eventually be reformed (as were the practices that resulted in the Nore and Spithead mutinies).

The paragraph in question, though, was shown to have been used as a preface in error and was discarded. Captain Vere was not decisively supported at the outset as had been thought. A still later edition, in 1976, restored the questionable paragraph, placing it further on in the story. By this time, though, it should have become evident that the preface was not crucial, after all, since the narration amply sets forth the same justification for England and for Vere. Nevertheless, the impression lingered that the discrediting of the preface in 1962 favored the new resistance-ironic reading.

So, too, with Melville's revisions. The 1962 editors Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts had shown that Melville, working in his typical fashion, had incrementally added complexities in successive rewritings of *Billy Budd*, the last one of which added lines in which Vere's subordinate officers voice doubts about his conduct. On the other hand, the editors pointed out that Melville also added exonerations of Vere at the same last stage. Nevertheless, a second misleading impression was created—namely, that at the time of his death Melville was moving toward discrediting Vere.

In academic literary disputes there is never an adjudicating body to pronounce on the issues or even to decide what they are. Published contentions about literary works can be noticed, ignored, or credited as each professional reader sees fit. Arguments may be dismissed, accepted, or disputed, again as individual critics see fit. Accordingly, just as the 1962 edition of *Billy Budd* could misleadingly leave impressions favorable to the resistance reading, so resistance essays on Billy Budd could continue to exert influence for years after their arguments were refuted. For these reasons, and because of the editorial issues, it took some twenty years, until 1968, for the major arguments about *Billy Budd* to be thoroughly sifted.

In the meantime, evaluations continued to be written from what might be called the commonsense point of view—namely, that the narration meant what it said. The resistance/ironist argument, advanced for the most part by academics who had never earned critical stature, seemed destined to fade quietly into obscurity. It was true that the ironists included in their number Melville's scholarly biographer, Lawrence Thompson. But Thompson was not a literary critic, and his eccentric contention that the narrator of *Billy Budd* should be seen as "stupid" was not shared by other ironist critics, who in any case tended to disagree with one another in yet other respects.

In contrast to the ironists, the commonsense readers included writers of international stature and, later, leading intellectuals and scholar-critics of the great age of literary criticism from 1940 to the mid-1960s. Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, W. H. Auden, Albert Camus, Thornton Wilder, Lewis Mumford, Eugenio Montale, Hannah Arendt, and Lionel Trilling understood the story to mean what it said; so did the scholar-critics F. O. Matthiessen, Carl Van Doren, Yvor Winters, John Middleton Murry, Newton Arvin, R. P. Blackmur, Harry Levin, Charles Feidelson, Marius Bewley, Max-



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well Geismar, Richard Chase, Leon Howard, R. W. B. Lewis, Milton R. Stern, Wayne Booth, and Roger Shattuck.

In retrospect, some of the commonsense critics can be faulted for overemphasizing certain elements of the story in accordance with another enthusiasm of 1950s criticism—that for myth and symbolism. But they were uniformly careful to keep either their enthusiasms or their politics from governing their conclusions. Not so the ironist critics, who came to dominate academic interpretation in the course of the 1950s and 1960s. They allowed themselves to treat the story as confirming their own political opinions. For them, its supposed disapproval of Captain Vere contained a political criticism of his privileged class. When their case was finally scrutinized and found wanting in 1968, they did not bother to respond to the essay that refuted them.

The myriad of ironist arguments—one later essay lists seventeen points supposedly telling against Captain Vere—actually come down to a single issue: the necessity of trying, sentencing, and hanging Billy. If Vere is not inexorably constrained to arrange these steps, he is most certainly blameworthy. If Vere's actions are defensible, on the other hand, then any anomalies in his character and behavior are reduced to relative unimportance. Practically speaking, therefore, in responding to the ironist argument one can put aside everything other than Vere's decision to arrange Billy's trial and hanging. This means that the debate over *Billy Budd* centers on the brief, pro forma, drumhead court meeting called by Vere to confirm that Billy must be hanged.

The officers present naturally want to take into account three things: Claggart's provocation, Billy's likely innocence of the mutiny charge, and the absence of any intention to kill. But Vere explains that neither circumstance nor motive can be taken into account in a military court operating under the Articles of War. The officers then ask if the court can find Billy guilty but mitigate the sentence. No, Vere explains, the death penalty is absolute and firm. Innocent though Billy may have been of the mutiny charge brought against him by Claggart, deserving of death though Claggart may have been, mercifully and understandably disposed to pardon Billy as the captain and his officers understandably are, Billy Budd has committed murder without any visible, nameable, extenuating circumstance such as the military law might allow.

The draconian necessity of executing Billy can be denied only if one is willing to set aside the undeviating strictures of the military law. One branch of ironist criticism is willing to set aside the law as outlined by Vere. Its practitioners contend that the eighteenth-century military statutes governing warships must have made Vere aware that he could have judged and acted otherwise. In the absence of any hint in the story itself that Vere may have misapplied the law, such research can simply be dismissed out of hand. Literary criticism concerns itself with what authors wrote, not with how they might have been more accurate. Criticism may, to be sure, usefully comment on discrepancies between a fictional account and the historical record to which it refers. The author may have committed a revealing slip—naming a wrong king or president—or have intended a minor joke or irony by incorporating an error of fact. But these possibilities are nothing like what the critics assume about *Billy Budd*—namely, that the reader is supposed by Melville to possess an arcane knowledge of eighteenth-century British naval law, and from it to conclude that Vere knowingly violated correct procedure.

As chance would have it, Vere's judgments and procedures, along with his account of the law to the drumhead court, turn out to be historically correct. At the time the story takes place, it would have been virtually impossible for Billy to have escaped hanging under *civilian* law. Melville discussed the far more stringent military law in *White-Jacket*, his 1850 account of "The World in a Man-of-War." In peacetime, he pointed out—and in the relatively lenient American navy—no matter what provocation an officer might commit, every sailor's "indignant tongue is treble-knotted by the law that suspends death itself over his head should his passion discharge the slightest blow at the boy-worm [that is, the young officer] that spits at his feet." In *Billy Budd*'s wartime English setting, instant hanging, rather than the hanging at dawn as arranged by Vere, would have been the most likely result of either disobeying or striking an officer, let alone killing one.

It is just conceivable that the punishment for defying or even striking and killing an offi-



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cer could have been put off, under special circumstances, for enactment when the ship returned to its squadron. This is the alternative that occurs to one of Vere's officers just before the trial. The best-informed ironist attacks on Vere come down to advocating such a delay, even though Melville is at pains to justify the more usual course taken by Vere of acting quickly. But if actual eighteenth-century naval practice is going to be invoked, then the most likely outcome of putting off Billy's trial, sad to relate, would have been a death sentence in the form of his being flogged through the fleet. This horrific punishment, a flaying alive, always resulting in death and which was almost inevitably imposed for striking an officer, was described by Melville in excruciating detail in *White-Jacket.* It had been imposed on some of the Nore mutineers, whose fates are reported in the naval history cited by Melville in *Billy Budd* itself.

Legal questions aside, to argue that *Billy Budd* should be taken ironically is to argue that, as one critic has been honest enough to put it, this story is "unique in the history of fiction." A few late-nineteenth-century stories present what are known as unreliable narrators: that is, narrators whose self-serving way of setting forth the facts is meant to be seen through by the reader. But there is no contemporary story in which what is claimed about *Billy Budd* exists: namely, that the author-narrator expresses himself in a style that on the one hand reflects his own personality and convictions, yet on the other hand perversely and obscurely—so obscurely that no one notices his intention for a quarter of a century—is meant to be read as revealing the opposite of what he says. Such a story would be a literary curiosity. It would also amount to being a one-dimensional tale of innocence oppressed by cruel tyranny: in effect a literarily uninteresting tract warning that people in positions of authority are liable to abuse their power.

Given the overwhelming case against the ironist reading, its persistence among so much as a minority of critics—let alone its present dominance—would be difficult to explain. But a remark by Milton Stern (perhaps the leading Melville scholar of his time), goes some distance toward explaining the theory's attraction. Writing against the ironist interpretation in 1971, Stern was concerned to dispel the assumption held by many of its proponents that Melville could not possibly be sympathetic to Vere and Vere's privileged class. Stern demonstrated that Melville, rather than remaining an upbraider of destiny throughout his career, had become increasingly conservative over the years. His sympathy with Vere, therefore, was to be expected. Stern's demonstration was all the more convincing inasmuch as he did not share Melville's point of view. Instead, he confessed in his introduction to *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1975), "I find myself in sympathy with the ironist readings although I disagree with them." Stern, it can be said, resisted the ironist temptation. But exactly what was the source of the temptation toward which he confessed himself to be drawn?

Lionel Trilling provided an answer to the question in his novel of 1947, *The Middle of the Journey.* In it, though he was writing before the first ironist/resistance reading of *Billy Budd* appeared, Trilling anticipated the attraction of the thesis. His novel's character, Gifford Maxim, is an American Communist who announces his break from the Party in the complicated form of an essay on *Billy Budd.* In the essay he offers a critique of "the modern mind . . . in its radical or liberal intellectual part." Committed as this mind is to utopianism, he explains, it fails to grasp the deeper realities of life and therefore will have an inadequate understanding of *Billy Budd.* To the liberal mind, Maxim writes:

> Billy Budd will be nothing more than an oppressed worker, and a very foolish one, an insufficiently activated one, nothing more than a "company man," weakly acquiescent to the boss. And Captain Vere will seem as at best but a conscience-ridden bourgeois, sympathetic to a man of the lower orders but committed to carrying out the behest of the established regime.

The only difference between this attitude and the academic resistance reading of only a few years later—aside from Maxim's 1930s-style rhetoric—is that the reader described by Maxim does not presume that Melville himself intended his story to be taken as a political protest.

In his own reading of *Billy Budd,* Maxim focuses on the conflict between "Law," as represented by Vere, and "Spirit," as represented by Billy. (Maxim's use of the word *Spirit,* though evidently intended by Trilling in part



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to convey Maxim's portentous abstractness of thought, would later appear in actual *Billy Budd* criticism.) Billy's Spirit consists, of course, in his profound innocence, associated by Melville with the Adamic state of man before the Fall. But Billy lives after the Fall, in a condition that Maxim, still in his portentous style, describes as one of "Necessity." The result, as Maxim formulates it, is that "Vere must rule the world of Necessity because Claggart—Evil—exists."

The reader of *The Middle of the Journey* is obliged to think through Maxim's oracular pronouncement. Its point would seem to be that the Claggarts of the world may be offset morally by its Billys, but practically the Billys are not able to deal with the Claggarts in any effectual way. Society, therefore, has to resort to the rule of law. Necessarily crude and imperfect, the law cannot adequately assess a pure nature such as Billy's—or a purely evil one, such as Claggart's. Hence the tragic dilemma of *Billy Budd*: the law, though indispensable, may in the rare case destroy a representative of the very "Spirit" it was instituted to protect. The weight of Maxim's critique is directed at the failure of the liberal mind to recognize that there is no way out of such a tragic dilemma. "The belief of the modern progressive," he writes,

> is that Spirit should find its complete expression at once. Everything that falls short of the immediate expression of Spirit is believed to be an ignominious moral inadequacy. To such minds Captain Vere is culpable because he does not acquit Billy in defiance of all Law. To them, Vere's suffering at being unable to do so is a mere sentimentality. It is even hypocrisy.

By the "expression" of Spirit, Maxim means simply the triumphing of the good. He is arguing that the 1930s progressive mind cannot bear to accept a setback for the good when, as with Billy, it is powerfully associated with the working class. Later, resistance critics never quite called for Billy's acquittal by Vere in defiance of all law. Yet Trilling, through Maxim, clearly anticipated that they would harbor just such a wish.

Through Maxim, Trilling also exposed a defect of the original acceptance theory. He did so by coloring Maxim's acceptance of Billy's sacrifice with a subtly revealed, smug satisfaction. Maxim grasps the necessity for Billy's death a bit too readily and with too little regret. His initial formulation is sound: even though Billy is destroyed by the Law, his Spirit is preserved because order has been preserved. In the preservation of Spirit, Maxim persuasively argues, lies mankind's hope for progress—a hope ill-served by the liberal mind's incapability of postponing utopia. Yet Maxim reveals that he is not truly dedicated to Spirit. He is just as desirous, one suspects, of putting off the triumph of Spirit as liberals are of rushing it. Consumed with his insights into the idealistic misconceptions of the liberal mind from which he has freed himself, Maxim, though he would deny it, has actually shifted his allegiance to the letter rather than the spirit of the law.

On the one side, then, Trilling showed that the acceptance reading of *Billy Budd* is susceptible to a rigidly reactionary impulse, while on the other side the resistance reading is driven by an opposite, equally rigid demand for imminent change in the human condition. Of the two, the impulse for change is likely, in the nature of things, to be the more urgently evoked in most readers by the story—hence, the greater temptation for the resistance reader to mold the story to his own desires. Melville himself comments on our instinctive attraction to the ideal natural man brought to mind by Billy. That which is "pristine and unadulterated," he writes in *Billy Budd*, always seems to derive from man in his natural, prelapsarian state. In contrast, "the man thoroughly civilized"—which is to say, the man like Captain Vere—has to the "moral palate a questionable smack as of a compounded wine."

From the outset, furthermore, Billy is presented as not only attractive in himself, but as virtually embodying the democratic ethos. He acts as a peacemaker aboard his first ship, *The Rights of Man*. Here, partly thanks to him, democracy's dream of creating a political state in which natural man is preserved seems to be realized. No wonder that Billy, who suggests so much more than mere order in society, commands greater emotional allegiance from the reader than either the law or its representatives.

On the other hand, Melville does not entirely weigh the balance in favor of natural Spirit over Law, as is often assumed. For *Billy Budd* has to do with *military* law. The draconian



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absolutes that prevent military law from taking into account the extenuating circumstances surrounding Billy's crime, Melville makes clear, would not apply under civilian law. "Before a court less arbitrary and more merciful than a martial one," Vere points out at Billy's trial, the evident fact that Billy intended "neither mutiny nor homicide" (as one of the officers has put it on his behalf), "would largely extenuate." Generalizations about the rigidity of ordinary law—seen as one of its necessary features by Trilling's Maxim, or as one of its reformable cruelties by resistance critics—do not really apply.

Melville constructed a very special situation in which society, in order to preserve itself from a hostile outside force, temporarily invokes a unique kind of law governing a small minority of its citizens. To be sure, some critics, recognizing the uniqueness of the situation, have not hesitated to condemn English society for arming itself with martial law. The same society, they can point out, is also shown to perpetuate cruel injustices like Billy Budd's impressment. In addition, the protest against such injustices in the recent mutinies that Melville makes much of were "fanned by flames from across the sea"—in other words, were inspired by the French Revolution against which Billy and his impressed shipmates are forced to fight. The Revolution, Melville has admitted, purposed "the rectification of the Old World's hereditary wrongs," and "to some extent, this was bloodily effected." Why not, then, a resistance reading of *Billy Budd* based on rejection of retrograde England?

It is possible to advocate such a reading so long as one recognizes that Melville himself did not share it. Instead, he emphasized that Billy would have had no better chance under the Revolutionary French. As Captain Vere points out at the trial, "the enemy" (France) also has "naval conscripts, some of whom may even share our own abhorrence of the regicidal French Directory." The French conscripts must, like Billy, serve under martial law, which is after all universal. (Martial law was not slated for reform by the French revolutionaries.)

*Billy Budd*, all this is to say, is not merely about England at the end of the eighteenth century. Nor is it, as some critics would have it, allusively about America in the nineteenth century, though both of these places are included in its reach. *Billy Budd* is about the tragic possibilities inherent in society's invocation of its ultimate power over life and death when faced with an external threat to its existence. If the story concerned an evil society that did not deserve to exist, or a naval officer who acted in a perverse manner, then the whole point would be lost. The society would be bad, or the military officer would be bad, but the conundrums of power in all human societies would not be at issue. As a result, the story would have little resonance.

Oddly enough, those who conclude that society is in fact being condemned by Melville because it kills Billy Budd fail to ask themselves how absolutely they really maintain their objection to such a sentence as the one Billy receives. Trilling in effect raised this question in the chilling conclusion to the chapter on *Billy Budd* in *The Middle of the Journey*. He has a liberal-progressive, fellow-traveling husband and wife typical of well-meaning intellectuals of the 1930s contemplate Maxim's essay. Given their views, both are naturally repelled by its defense of Billy's sentence, but on one point they shockingly support what they take to be one of the essay's purports:

> "If you think about it," said Nancy, "you see that it is really quite applicable to the Moscow trials. Even if those men were subjectively innocent—I mean even if they had good motives for what they did, like Budd—I don't believe that that's so, but even if it were so—they may have had to be executed for the sake of what he calls Law in the world of Necessity. And you remember how they all concurred in their punishment and seemed almost to *want* it. Certainly before they died they had a proper appreciation of Law. They realized that the dictatorship of the proletariat represented Law."

When it comes to apologizing for executions by the state, Trilling is pointing out, the same liberal mind that professes an absolute dedication to Spirit has provided the world with examples of willing acquiescence and even unsolicited apologetics for the murder of innocent individual spirits committed for reasons of state.

The resistance reading anticipated by Trilling could not in the nature of things take the specific 1930s form he gave it of treating Billy as a worker and Vere as a boss or exploiter. Instead, resistance readings eventually began



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to take on the coloration of 1960s radicalism. Stimulated by the concept of innocent youth punished by paternal authority, critics in the 1960s imagined Melville to be finding fault with "the system," by which they sometimes meant the law and sometimes the "tragic guilt" of society itself. The demise of Billy, wrote one critic willing to put not too fine a partisan political point on it, was a "triumph of political evil, of conservatism." It followed that the story meant not only radically to champion "the people," but also amounted to "a call to rebellion."

As for Captain Vere, he became either the sixties equivalent of the capitalist exploiter, or an "organization man" (a fifties term still in circulation), or an upholder of the status quo, or simply a rigid authoritarian. Vere seemed no less distasteful in the 1970s, but some resistance critics did begin an attempt to find a way out of having to maintain that *Billy Budd* is to be read ironically. Under the influence of post-structuralism, it began to be suggested that *Billy Budd* was uninterpretable. Either Melville had written an imperfect story, or an ultimately meaningless story, or else he had left evidence balanced so as to be both for and against Vere, in which case the story functioned as a kind of Rorschach test in which the reader "exposes his own nature" in judging it.

For the most part, the resistance/ironist reading continued to hold sway in the 1970s. Summarizing critical opinion in 1975, Barbara Johnson could quote critics who called Vere "authoritarian," "stupid," "cowardly," "vicious," "perverted," and "criminal." One can add that by this time Vere was routinely being held personally responsible for Billy Budd's death. He was a "martinet" whose "persecution" of the innocent young sailor was variously explained as a "monomania," as "sadomasochistic," or as "primitively" inspired. Vere's speech to the drumhead court came to be described as "one of the most wicked uses to which rhetoric has ever been put." Vere himself was described as "this war criminal," and was compared to a "commandant of a concentration camp."

Resistance critics were not embarrassed to join in what could with justice be described as a ganging up on Captain Vere. On the contrary, instead of recognizing that they reflect a consensus, most revilers of Vere contrive to present themselves as dissenters from a supposedly dominant sympathy for Vere. In fact, such sympathy grew increasingly rare in the 1970s and 1980s. In the meantime, though, within the resistance orthodoxy the proliferating analyses and explanations for Vere's conduct were beginning to contradict one another. In addition, eccentric propositions, such as the one that Vere and Claggart are equally depraved characters, became commonplace. At the same time, *defenses* of Claggart also became common. No theory, no matter how farfetched, was challenged so long as it claimed to support the resistance reading.

In the 1980s, revealingly, the generalized opposition to authority of the 1960s and 1970s came to express itself in *Billy Budd* criticism in a more explicitly expressed political radicalism. The terminology of the 1930s used by Lionel Trilling's characters began to appear in actual criticism. *Billy Budd* became a conflict between members of "a ruling class" and "the common people they oppress." One critic explained that "the social group" to which Vere belongs "is largely responsible for what happens." As for the nation-state of which Vere's group is a part, it operates under "a bankrupt moral system." Vere ultimately represents what amounts to a "military state" resting on a "police power" and a "war machine."

The "system" these critics have in mind turns out to be not so much the English as the American one. Melville may have written about eighteenth-century Great Britain, but Vere's ship, the *Bellipotent*, is said to be an "apt" name for America. One critic commits a revealing slip by arguing that, after killing Claggart, Billy should have been removed to another "American" ship. For another critic, Melville's story "foreshadows . . . the triumph of militarism and imperialism in America." The guns on Vere's ship should be regarded as having historically "evolved" into the aggressive missiles of what yet another critic terms the American "war machine." Moreover, Captain Vere's mustering of his crew on deck should call to mind "the giant Nazi rallies," and hence, almost needless to say, America.

Once the analogy with America was established, yet more extreme political views proliferated. One critic argued that because the sailors accept Billy's sentence, they are like "the [American] citizenry, cowed into uncomprehending, submissive apathy, [which] gives the captains of government and industry a free hand with the deficit, pollution, the arms



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race, the whole, huge, unholy, terrifying mess." What began as a self-indulgence of *Billy Budd* criticism—allowing one's political sensibilities to influence interpretation of the story—reached a logical conclusion: politics came to dominate interpretation.

Ironically enough, no sooner was the radicalizing of the resistance interpretation accomplished than its practitioners began to find their own rhetoric unsatisfactory. One of these practitioners was Bruce Franklin, a radical critic who condemned "those who misread the story"—that is, read it as written—for having "terrifying values." Franklin did not reveal how he would treat fellow politically radical critics of the past—among them Maxwell Geismar, F. O. Matthiessen, and Newton Arvin—who figured prominently in establishing the acceptance reading of *Billy Budd.*

Nor did Franklin seem to be aware that he was in effect also condemning his contemporary fellow radicals for too vigorously adopting the resistance reading. Yet this is the implication of his somewhat rueful conclusion that if Vere is seen as "an especially tyrannical, unjust, irrational, brutal, or ignorant captain, his act [that is, of condemning Billy] could be ascribed to his personal character rather than to the military and imperialist institution of which he is, by his own argument, merely an officer." In other words, too much denunciation of Vere can prove to be politically counterproductive. In fact, as other politically radical critics have begun to realize, ascribing *any* guilt to Vere interferes with the political use of *Billy Budd* by narrowing the focus from the governmental system to an individual.

Liberal resistance criticism, unlike its radical cousin, does not have as its primary purpose the discrediting of American institutions. Yet any resistance reading, often without realizing it, amounts to a repudiation not just of the particular authority that happens to be responsible for Billy's execution, but of governmental authority in general. As one Marxist critic pointed out: "To read Vere literally is to accept the existing system of authority. To read Vere ironically is to undercut it." Should a resistance reader admit, explicitly or implicitly, that an existing authority can be legitimate, then his reading would be fatally undermined. For it is always conceivable that legitimate authority may have to act to preserve itself by wielding the most extreme form of punishment at its command. It then becomes possible for there to arise a circumstance in which a death sentence could prove to be legitimate in principle but repulsive in practice. In such a situation one would have to recognize the crude limitations of authority yet reluctantly concede its ultimate legitimacy. This is precisely what Melville confronts the reader with in *Billy Budd.*

To say that one "accepts" *Billy Budd,* therefore, is hardly to express complacency. On the other hand, to "resist" the logic of *Billy Budd,* paradoxically enough, does lead toward complacency. For by assuming that there is a way out of the dilemma posed by Melville, and by denouncing Captain Vere for not taking it, the resistance reader spares himself the philosophical and moral conundrum posed by the story as written. Acceptance therefore proves to allow more scope than so-called resistance for the full play of disturbing emotions stirred up by Melville's carefully wrought dilemma.

Among the painful implications with which the acceptance reader must struggle are the story's negative implications for democracy. To be sure, it isn't democratic America that is designated in the story, despite claims by radical critics, but England. Yet Melville calls England at the time *Billy Budd* takes place "the sole free conservative power in the world." Of course, in the political culture of American universities, where "conservatism" is equated with "political evil," the phrase has been taken to condemn England. Read without prejudice, though, it solicits the reader's allegiance on behalf of England against Revolutionary France on the grounds of England's maintaining a representative, or "free" government. (Here it is that one can properly describe *Billy Budd* as having reference to America, whose government is also a free one.) At the same time as England is endorsed, its hanging of Billy casts doubt on the efficacy of free institutions, and hence on the American nation's conception of itself as the perfection of English freedom.

In the Old World, in an absolute monarchy such as that of czarist Russia, Billy could have been saved—as he could be in a modern totalitarian state. A member of Captain Vere's class in an absolute monarchy would be free to act arbitrarily to pardon or even reward Billy if he saw fit. As for the crew, it would interpret such an arbitrary suspension of the law not as a sign



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of weakness (as Vere worries it may in the wake of recent mutinies), but as an expression of power—of the very principle of absoluteness on which such a state rests. Only in constitutional states such as Great Britain and the United States does a departure from legal procedure present itself as a breakdown of the system.

As a young nation, America has from the outset been represented symbolically by ingenuous young men comparable to Billy Budd. In contrast to the Old World's practice of hemming in its citizens with formal, legal restraints, America theoretically trusts in the unfettering of such individuals. But America has chosen at the same time to apply to them and others the English tradition's respect for the law in a more pure and equitable fashion. With cruel irony, this respect and this purity turn out to be exactly the forces that doom Billy. Melville seems to be suggesting that a kind of iron necessity in human affairs renders permanent the law's built-in insensitivity to the essence of the individual. With the best will in the world, it follows, a democratic state will always harbor the same capacity to violate innocence as any other political system.

Resistance readers, insofar as they have considered this conundrum of democracy, have taken it as a call for reform. Historically, this is apt: as Frederick I. Carpenter pointed out in 1953, the American democracy did go on after Melville's time to include the tempering of justice with mercy even in its martial law. But the Melville of *Billy Budd* was no reformer such as he had been early in his career; rather, he had become a conservative pessimist. Ignoring the evidence of Melville's shift to conservatism both in his life and in *Billy Budd*, resistance readers have continued to view him as interested in correcting an inequity. Instead, he was pointing out a tragic limitation in human affairs.

To resistance readers it seems that to accept Melville's plot is to adopt the view that the givens of the law cannot and should not be altered. But acceptance implies only that the plot of Billy Budd as Melville devised it cannot be rejected: given the circumstances laid out, Billy must die. (Acceptance by no means requires adopting the view of the early critics who read the story as an allegory of acceptance by Melville of his neglect by the public.) Acceptance of *Billy Budd*'s plot, this is to say, need not imply acquiescence spiritually in its outcome. Indeed, resistance within a framework of acceptance is entirely possible. Such resistance might charge Melville with something akin to the *Schadenfreude* of Trilling's character Maxim, who welcomes the catastrophe of innocence in *Billy Budd.*

So framed, the debate over *Billy Budd* could rise above the crude ressentiment to which resistance critics have reduced it. Commonsense critics could defend Melville's assault on the progressive impulse as disinterestedly realistic and not Maxim-like. Resistance critics would respond in their turn, expressing in one way or another their reactions to the story's seeming refutation of the progressive impulse. But so long as resistance critics unnecessarily deny the plain sense of *Billy Budd*, they succeed in illuminating only their own willingness to distort literature in the interests of repudiating authority.



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# What Went Wrong?

## Some Reflections on Arab History

BERNARD LEWIS

Arabic is one of the great languages of human civilization and history. Like Hebrew, it is a language of revelation, of sacred scriptures revered by hundreds of millions of believers. Like Greek, it was a language of science and philosophy, providing the basic texts and even the conceptual vocabulary of a whole civilization. Like Latin, it was the language of law and government and the source of both ideas and vocabulary in these fields; like French, the standard of taste and elegance for that same civilization. Like French and English, it has been the language of culture and commerce, science and politics, love and war. And even today, like English and Spanish, it is the shared heritage of many nations and the binding thread of a cultural and intellectual association which transcends national, regional, and ideological barriers.

At its peak, the civilization expressed in this language presented a proud spectacle—in many ways the apex of human achievement to that date. There were other civilizations at the time—in India, in China, and, to a lesser extent, in Europe—that were advanced and sophisticated, and perhaps in some individual respects or areas they may have been ahead of Islam. But all of them remained essentially local, at best regional, civilizations. Islam was not the first religion whose spokesmen claimed that the truths entrusted to them were not only universal but also exclusive—that they were the sole custodians of God's final revelation which it was their duty to bring to all the peoples of the world. But the Muslims were the first to make significant progress in achieving this aim, by creating a religious civilization beyond the limits of a single race or region or culture. The Islamic world in the high Middle Ages was international, multi-racial, polyethnic, one might even say intercontinental.

In the late S. D. Goitein's felicitous phrase, it was "the intermediate civilization"—intermediate in both time and space. Its outer limits were in southern Europe, in central Africa, in southern and southeastern and eastern Asia, and it embraced elements of all of these. It was also intermediate in time, between antiquity and modernity, sharing the Hellenistic heritage with European Christendom and enriching it with elements adapted from remoter lands and cultures—such as Indian numbers, without which modern mathematics would have been inconceivable, and the Chinese invention of paper, which revolutionized not only literary and educational pursuits but also business and government. Of the alternative routes from Hellenistic antiquity to modern times, it might well have seemed that it was the Islamic civilization of the Arabs, rather than those of Greek or Latin Christendom, that offered the greater promise of advancing toward a modern and universal civilization.

And yet somehow, we don't really know how; sometime, we can't exactly agree when; something, we're not at all sure what, went

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wrong. While the poor, parochial, monochrome culture of Christian Europe advanced from strength to strength, the Islamic civilization of the Arabs suffered a loss of creativity, of energy, and of power.

From a surprisingly early date, there are signs of a realization among the Muslims themselves that things were not as they had been. Already in classical Arabic literature there are expressions of a vague, generalized awareness of a falling away from a past that was becoming increasingly remote and therefore more easily idealized. The best known, though by no means the first, attempt by a Muslim author to document and analyze the processes of loss of power was the great fourteenth-century historian and social thinker, Ibn Khaldun. In his presentation of the rise and fall of kingdoms and cultures, the actors in the drama are tribal and ethnic solidarity groups and the issues are military power and political control.

Ibn Khaldun, an Arab, observed without distress the transfer of leadership and domination in the Islamic world from the Arabs to the Turks. On the contrary, he saw the coming of the Turks as a sign of God's providential concern for the Islamic faith and the Muslim community. At a time, he says, when

> the state was drowned in decadence and luxury and donned the garments of calamity and impotence and was overthrown by the heathen Tatars . . . because the Muslims, sunk in self-indulgence, preoccupied with pleasure and abandoned to luxury, had become deficient in energy and reluctant to rally in defense . . . then it was God's benevolence that He restored the faith by reviving its dying breath and restoring the unity of the Muslims . . . preserving the order and defending the walls of Islam. . . . He did this by sending to the Muslims, from among the great and numerous tribes of the Turkish nation, rulers to defend them and utterly loyal helpers.

For Ibn Khaldun, as for most other Muslims of his time and long after, what mattered was not the rise and fall of nations or tribes or dynasties within the Islamic community, but the continued survival and success of that community. To that end, the strongest and most effective would lead, whoever they might be, and they would take over the task of defending Islam and maintaining, upholding, and advancing the Faith.

During the centuries of Turkish domination, there are occasional expressions of ethnic rivalry and even hostility among the different groups composing the Empire. But these are of relatively minor significance. The overwhelming weight of the evidence is that, almost to the end, the Arabic-speaking, Muslim populations of the Ottoman Empire remained loyal subjects of the Sultan, whom they accepted as the legitimate successor of the Caliphs and Sultans of bygone centuries. Not surprisingly, it was among the Turks, rather than among the Arabs, that the debate began about the faltering of Ottoman power and their growing inability to confront their European Christian enemies over whom, in earlier times, they had won so many brilliant victories. Remarkably, this debate began during the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent when, by most standards, the Ottoman Empire appeared to be at the height of its power. In 1549 Lûtfi Pasha was dismissed by the Sultan from his office as Grand Vizier and retired to his estate, where he thought about the problems of the Empire and wrote what was probably the first attempt to identify and analyze the causes of decline and to propose remedies for them.

Such discussions became more and more numerous during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and, still more, the nineteenth centuries, when the facts of Ottoman weakness and retreat could not be concealed and when the energies and thoughts of a long succession of Ottoman officials and intellectuals were devoted to examining them. The encroachment of the West, at first limited to the frontiers, began to affect even the central provinces of the Empire, and the debate about its causes, at first limited to small groups of military officers and civilian officials, was taken up in ever-widening circles. The disparity between Muslim and Christian power, both on the battlefield and in the marketplace, was becoming painfully obvious. Direct experience of this Western impact also affected opinion in the Arabic-speaking provinces, where the newly imported European idea of nationality on the one hand, and a renewed interest in the classical Arabic heritage on the other, combined to revive a sense of Arab pride and, with it, inevitably, a sense of loss for the power and the glory that were no longer theirs.

From the nineteenth century, when Arab intellectuals first became aware of the relative



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weakness and poverty of their countries as contrasted with the rest of the world, they were able to provide explanations. For a long time these explanations were almost entirely political and military and placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of foreign invaders and rulers. According to this perception, classical Islamic civilization was destroyed by the Mongol invaders in the thirteenth century. Had it not thus been untimely struck down, it would have gone on to reach ever new heights. The Mongols, having shattered the great civilization of the Caliphate, ruined and devastated the Arab lands, so that they fell an easy prey to the Ottoman Turks, whose oppressive rule endured from 1517 until the end of the First World War. And when the Arabs, promised their freedom by the Western powers, tried to assert their independence, they were once again subjected to foreign rule, this time by Britain and France. Even after the withdrawal of the British and French imperial armies and administrations, the Arab lands remained at the mercy of outside powers and of their local puppets and protégés.

Such explanations are at first sight sufficient and were no doubt satisfying. The Mongol invaders did indeed devastate parts of the Middle East, and they destroyed the Caliphate. The Ottomans did indeed rule much of the Arab world for some four centuries, and when they left they were replaced, not by independent Arab rulers, but by the imperial powers of the West. But subsequent historical research and reflection have shown that other factors besides the political and military were at work, and that even the political and military changes were not as simple and one-sided as was at one time believed. Arab historians now recognize that classical Islamic civilization had long passed its prime when the Mongols arrived on the scene and was already in an advanced state of what most of them would call decline. The Mongol disruption, though immense, was confined, among Arab lands, to Iraq. Syria was only minimally affected, Egypt and North Africa hardly at all. And in the lands where the Mongols ruled, in the eastern half of the Middle East, they presided over a new age of prosperity and even of cultural efflorescence, much of it, however, expressed in Persian and not in Arabic. The Ottoman conquest of the Arab lands, far from being a subjugation, was in many respects a liberation from the harsh rule of the late Mamluk Sultans. In Syria especially, it inaugurated an era of peace and plenty. Those Arab countries, like Morocco, that escaped Ottoman rule did not fare better than those that experienced it.

Nor is there any evidence that the Ottoman Sultans were regarded by their Arab subjects as foreign oppressors. The Western notions of nationalism and national self-determination did not reach the Middle East until centuries after the Ottoman conquest, and for most of their time, the Ottoman Sultans were accepted by all their Muslim subjects, irrespective of language and ethnic origin, as the lawful sovereigns of a universal Islamic empire.

The period of European rule was, in the larger perspective of history, of remarkably brief duration, beginning, in the central lands, in the aftermath of the First World War and ending in the aftermath of the Second. Moreover, the processes of European impact and influence were more complex and more varied than was at first realized.

The domination of the Arabs by the Turks and the subsequent domination of the larger Islamic world, to which both the Turks and the Arabs belonged, by Europe, were part of a larger process extending over many centuries. It began as far back as the seventh century, when the advancing power of the new faith of Islam carried its *jihad* against Christendom from the once Christian lands of the Levant and North Africa into the European mainland. Twice, Islam almost conquered Europe, through the Arab invasions of Spain and Sicily, and some centuries later, the Ottoman advance into the Balkan peninsula. Further east, a third attempt was launched by the Tatars, the Islamized Mongol and Turkish peoples who conquered Russia and established a Muslim domination over Muscovy.

By the end of the fifteenth century the peoples of the Iberian Peninsula at one end of Europe, and of Russia at the other, had defeated and expelled their former Muslim rulers. At both ends of Europe, the reconquest developed into a conquest, and in time to a world domination.

The important question for the historian is not why the Europeans tried to dominate the Muslims—this had for centuries been the normal behavior of both sides—but why they succeeded. And for this, answers may be sought in



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both European strength and Muslim weakness.

Modern scholarship has found much of the explanation in economic change and particularly in the decline of agriculture. This in itself was in no small degree the consequence of political change. Agriculture in the great river valley economies of Iraq and Egypt depended very heavily on artificial irrigation, and this in turn depended on administrative efficiency and the maintenance of public order. When the Mongols failed to conquer Egypt and Syria, and established their base in Iran, Iraq became a border province, poorly policed and administered. This opened the breach to the depredations of the Bedouin, who, unlike the Mongols, did not go away and did not change their habits. Without organized drainage, agriculture also suffered from the increasing salinity of the soil, due to the quantities of salt brought down by the Tigris and the Euphrates, and the gradual deterioration of the soil of Iraq.

An important feature all over the Middle East was the lack of technological progress in agriculture. Even in the days of Ottoman greatness in the sixteenth century, the number of watermills and windmills listed in the Ottoman tax registers is proportionately much smaller than that shown in the Domesday Book in eleventh-century England. The social and political conditions of the Muslim countryside precluded the emergence of a class of educated gentlemen farmers, like those who contributed so much to the technological revolution of Western agriculture, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

There was also the problem of competition from the European states. These, thanks to the acquisition of tropical and subtropical colonies, were able to grow and export products that had previously figured prominently among exports of the Middle East to the West and elsewhere. Notable among them were sugar and cotton, which the Europeans transplanted first to the Atlantic islands, and then to the New World, and eventually exported even to the Middle East itself. The mercantilist policies of the producer-oriented European trading states, their more efficient production and more aggressive marketing, enabled them first to penetrate, and finally to dominate Middle Eastern markets. This applied not only to agricultural products, but even to industry and notably to textiles, which had once been a prominent Middle Eastern export to the West, and which were now brought to the Middle East by European merchants, both from their home industries and from their new Asian possessions and dependencies.

The advantage that these methods gave to the Western traders was compounded by their access to capital and to credit on a scale totally beyond Middle Eastern resources or possibilities. Already in the Middle Ages, Middle Eastern trade had suffered from a shortage of precious metals. In this they were no worse off than Christian Europe, which was at least equally deficient in bullion, but the situation changed dramatically with the discovery of America and the enrichment of European trade through the gold and silver of the New World.

Western supremacy in trade also benefited from a number of political and military factors. Perhaps of primary importance was the loss of sea power by the Muslim states in both the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean and the domination of the seas by Western fleets with larger and stronger ships built to face the Atlantic gales, and therefore more maneuverable and able to mount a much larger armament. The flimsy vessels of the Eastern powers were no match for a Portuguese, Dutch, French, or English man-of-war. It was not, however, the presence of Portuguese and other Westerners in India and southeast Asia that changed the conditions of trade decisively against the Middle East. There is evidence that trade continued on a quite considerable scale throughout the sixteenth century. The decisive change came when the west European trading nations established naval and even military bases in south and southeast Asia, and were thus able to use armed force as well as economic power to dominate the trade with Europe. The peoples of the Middle East—Turks, Iranians, and Arabs alike—were now caught in a slowly closing vice as the maritime powers advanced from both western Europe and southern Asia, and the Russians moved forward relentlessly from the north.

The social institutions and attitudes inherited from earlier times and maintained with increasing rigidity made it difficult to adapt to changing circumstances or to create new political and economic institutions that would facilitate such an adaptation. An attitude toward



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unbelievers that varied from condescension in good times to hostility and mistrust in bad times made it difficult to learn from them, or even to understand them, at a time when it was the West, and not as previously the Islamic world, that had something to teach. The traditional upper-class household, based on polygamy, concubinage, and domestic slavery, was ill-suited to the processes of social and cultural, and, therefore, also of political and economic modernization. All these factors combined to accelerate and accentuate the growing disparity between the Islamic and Western worlds, not only in wealth and power, but also—indeed more especially—in the ability to create wealth and to attain and use power constructively.

For a long time the Arab world was shielded by the might of the Ottoman Empire—still, even in its decline, a formidable barrier—from the advance of Europe and the impact of the new reality. For almost three-quarters of a century after the final defeat and breakup of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the Arab lands, despite the achievement of political independence and the acquisition of enormous though unevenly distributed wealth, remained subject to the influence of outside powers, and their destinies were to no small extent shaped by the rivalries, first of the European empires and then of the two rival continental superpowers.

Now all this has changed. The western European empires have long ceased to exist and even the superpowers, for different reasons, have lost or relinquished their former, dominant roles. For the first time in centuries, ultimate power, and with it ultimate responsibility, are at home in the Arab lands, and firmly in the hands of compatriots and co-religionists. This change should do much to clear the air and clarify the issues.



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# To Criticize the Critic

JOHN WAIN

WRITING DANGEROUSLY: MARY MCCARTHY AND HER WORLD. *By Carol Brightman. Clarkson Potter. $30.*

On they come, these thick, heavy, overdocumented biographies of writers, hell-bent on tying every episode, every locale, every character described in an imaginative work (prose, verse, drama, anything) to some demonstrable anchorage in the author's life. Never mind that the transcending of all those concrete circumstances, the lifting of the experience into another and freer dimension, was what made it into literature in the first place! "Nous avons changé tout cela," as the doctor says in Molière. This vogue now has a history of about thirty years. When it first started, one of the initial jobs was to sweep aside the feeble posthumous protests of writers who had left particular instructions that their biographies should *not* be written; they feared (and weren't they absolutely right?) all that thick-fingered probing. That kind of defense, of course, didn't last any longer than the first two little pigs lasted against the Big Bad Wolf. The publishing industry huffed and puffed and blew their house down. Next came the phase we are still in, which is one of recycling. When a writer who once had a considerable readership, and whose books earned a steady royalty, finally runs out and ceases to be hot property, he or she is recycled into biog-fodder. Nobody may be reading So-and-so anymore, but the punters will shell out for a detailed biography of So-and-so, especially if there is anything nasty in the woodshed.

Miss Brightman's biography of Mary McCarthy has all the vices of the genre; it would be better if it were about a quarter as long, and most of the quotations could be tossed out; they are usually from nonentities whose only qualification is that they actually knew McCarthy. So did I, if it comes to that, but only in her later years, when she had become benign and unaggressive, which must have been almost unimaginable in the 1940s and 1950s. Sometimes an overdocumented book can be fun to read, as bedside browsing for example, but this one isn't; the prose is so lumpy that one has trouble getting it down. I predict that it will be a book that will be more consulted than read. I approached it thinking I was going to read the life of a writer, but I found myself forced to make a readjustment; and after I had made it, the book seemed much better. It is the record of a life of combat. Mary McCarthy was a natural warrior; more than anything else, she loved a fight. As a result she often got hurt, especially when she took on unscrupulous opponents, particularly Lillian Hellman who had learned her infighting in a murderous school, the Kremlin Graduate School of People's Honesty and Openness; but from first to last, she could say, with Yeats's "Irish Airman," "A lonely impulse of delight / Drove to this tumult in the clouds."

Plowing through what Miss Brightman has to tell us about, for instance, the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, largely a face-lift job for international Communism, held at the Waldorf-Astoria in 1949, I found myself acknowledging that this research, one day, would be useful to somebody. Not to me, but to somebody. And the narrative certainly

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brings out one thing: the literary works are a spin-off. They are the colored sparks that fly off the grindstone as McCarthy sharpens her blade for the next hatchet job. To judge them as anything else would be unfair. To judge this book as anything else but a detailed record of action and the motives for action, rather than as the sustained contemplation of an artistic achievement, would likewise be unfair.

Art, beyond the level of a certain adroitness and an alert observation, hardly comes into it. What we have is journalism at one remove, which has its own standards and can be good or bad. McCarthy's, I think, is good sometimes sinking to good-*ish*. One of the reasons why her work has faded so completely is that she hooked it so directly to the present moment. To switch the metaphor, its roots were too shallow to get down to the deeper springs, so naturally it couldn't survive a dry season. How wan it looks now! *The Group*, that mighty best-seller of 1963 and a decade or so afterward, seems hardly worth the trouble of opening. As for the rest . . . no writer can be blamed for the movement of the world away from him or her, but there are some who seem to invite this fate by the promiscuous haste with which they involve the world in the first place.

Mary McCarthy's work has faded very quickly, but topicality invites this; and as long as a book is new, it can give pleasure, to many readers, by being topical. A writer who focuses on the issues of the hour runs the risk of outliving his material, as for instance Aldous Huxley did, and therefore having to keep in continuous production, though to the quasi-journalist that isn't usually much trouble; he readily enough gets the cover off the typewriter, or whatever technological thing it is that writers do nowadays. On the other hand, some writers, including the most valuable as well as the solitary cranks, have to hunt long and hard for their white whale. It took Herman Hesse eleven years to write his last novel, *The Glass Bead Game* (*Das Glasperlenspiel*), and while the German social scene underwent many changes in that time, the nature of humanity, his fundamental subject, didn't. Such lonely strivers are important in the total effort of a literature.

A lonely striver Mary McCarthy wasn't. To function in isolation was something she never tried to do. G. K. Chesterton, in his slapdash but brilliant book on Dickens, threw out the suggestion that most novelists have one title among their works that could be used as an umbrella title for all their books; for Dickens, he suggested, it would surely be *Great Expectations*. In the case of Mary McCarthy, it would surely have been *The Group*. The happy band of like-minded people, who, however much they may be addicted to backbiting, need to stay in the stockade of one another's company, was the dynamic metaphor of her life. But any group needs a fixative. It will not stand up by mere balance, like a house of cards. And the best fixative is self-righteousness, a feeling so potent that a mere touch of it will do the trick. "We," the like-minded, the right-thinking, the clever ones, the *bien-pensants*, are marked out from the gross common herd, and whatever grudges we have against one another, it is *our* principles that count, not those of the meat-headed, unthinking world, for we are the Saved.

The art of biography, like most arts, has been revolutionized by the science, if it is a science, of psychology. Certainly James Boswell, though a master biographer, would never have had so little to say about Johnson's childhood if he had been writing in our century. (He gave us all the materials for analysis, but not the analysis, which is perfectly fair.) It is natural, then, to look for the origin of McCarthy's need for a sharing and sheltering "group" in her checkered and unhappy formative years. And it's there, by golly.

Mary McCarthy's parents died within twenty-four hours of one another in the flu epidemic that closed in as the guns fell silent at the end of the First World War. In the family reorganization that followed, the seven-year-old Mary and her two younger brothers had to go and live with their great-aunt and great-uncle in Minneapolis, the family home in Seattle having been given up. This fostering couple, Myers and Margaret Shriver, seem to have been grim and unappealing, their home bleak and impersonal, their discipline harsh. (Kevin, Mary's immediate junior, was a natural mouth breather, which had the effect of making him snore; Myers Shriver's way of dealing with this was to send him to bed with his mouth rammed shut and covered with sticking plaster, leaving him to try to go to sleep with a sense of impending suffocation.) Part of Mary's reaction against this was to idealize her dead father, who was the wayward son of a prosperous fam-



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ily and in fact seems to have been rather like Dickens's father, a man of a certain charm and grace of manner but very obvious weaknesses of character (heavy drinking, for one) which in the end bore fruit in weaknesses of physical constitution (he had heart disease). The small Mary used to stare balefully at the graceless Teuton Schreiber and say within herself, "My father was a gentleman and you're a lout." By a natural extension, she clung to her cradle Catholicism (the Shrivers were Lutherans) because she had grasped already that the Catholic Church was something that connected her with civilization; it was her Church that had the great European cathedrals and the masterpieces of painting and the *Divina Commedia*. (I don't mean she knew all this at seven, of course, but she always caught on fast.)

To feel that she belonged to a superior group, then, was a necessary defense for her at the most vulnerable stage of her life, and though she later rejected Mother Church she never rejected the notion of an in-group, never learned to swim without those water wings. Vassar was an in-group, as she was still demonstrating in 1963, though she enjoyed having it both ways by looking back at the place with a condescending smile. Her first entry into authorship was under the aegis of the *Partisan Review*, the in-group to end them all. Most magazines function as tightly cohesive groups to some extent, but the *Partisan Review*, especially for the first ten or twelve years after its inception in 1934, seems to have resembled a family newsletter. Alfred Kazin remembers one of the editors asking, of a story that had been submitted for publication, "Who's in it?"

Mary McCarthy would have known who was in it. She needed the warmth and comfort of gossip, just as she needed the reach-me-down complacencies of a *chapelle*. For good measure she needed attention, exposure, publicity. From the small audience of initiates to the roar of the amphitheater, only please, never alone. To be perched up in front of large audiences, discussing whatever happened to be in the news at the moment simply because it *was* in the news (as at the hideously embarrassing Edinburgh conference in 1962 when the participants vied with one another in heaping praise on William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, a load of infected rubbish if ever I saw one) with a posse of reporters ready to beam out to the world's press any striking remark she happened to let fall, or alternatively arguing her head off under the glare of television lighting: all this was so much more fun, and so much more rewarding in terms of short-term advantage (publicity, sales, journalistic assignments) than the lonely toil of writing. But if we are to have a literature at all, someone must do the lonely toil, and the trouble has always been that art is a hard taskmistress.

This is one of the hard truths that lie behind the notorious spat between Mary McCarthy and Lillian Hellman, which happened late in both their lives—Hellman, the older by seven years, died while it was still going on, after which her estate seems to have dropped the case. One hopes they settled out of court, because surely Hellman was the injured party. McCarthy, at the mention of Hellman's name during a TV interview, had flared up and said that she was "a bad writer," "a dishonest writer," going on to add the custard-pie embellishment, "Every word she writes is a lie, including *and* and *the*." What makes this such sad stuff is not its extravagance—that's just funny—but the sloppy thinking behind it. When it came to attacking people for their political motives, when it came to rewriting her own personal history to show herself in a more courageous and glamorous light, Lillian Hellman was not above twisting the truth. But that would make her, regrettably enough, a dishonest *woman*, not a dishonest *writer*, which is what McCarthy said she was.

A human being is dishonest when he or she utters false statements, knowingly distorting or suppressing the truth. An artist is dishonest when he or she fails to show honesty in portraying the world as it is. To represent human life sentimentally, softening the meanness and cruelty that so often occur in it, or to do dirt on it à la William Burroughs, representing it as a continuous *Walpurgisnacht* of corruption and sickness, are both dishonest. They offer both writer and reader an escape from the discipline of coming to terms with the rich complexity of truth, and "humankind cannot bear much reality." We prefer to be shortchanged, whether it is William Burroughs or Barbara Cartland who shortchanges us, according to taste. Lillian Hellman, as a writer, was not guilty of this kind of dishonesty. Her story, "Julia," which forms the centerpiece of her series of quasi-autobiographical sketches,



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*Pentimento,* makes a feint at self-glorification or self-whitewashing, in that it depicts a woman, obviously a surrogate for herself, acting a brave role in a heroic conspiracy. As a matter of historical fact, this role was acted by another woman whose existence is not acknowledged. (Miss Brightman has the details.) But to do this is not to be a dishonest *writer.* On its own ground, the story is honest. It is first-rate, better than anything Mary McCarthy could do. It rings true. And because it rings true, it *is* true. What was the Nazi period in Germany actually *like?* The question is not narrowly historical. It was an unfree society, and all unfree societies have features in common, features that are obstinately ignored or glossed over by their apologists, so that for half a century the apologists for Communism who were so often to be met with in Western democracies were always making excuses for Communist practices that would have served just as well for Nazi practices. What is important is to divine, acknowledge, and come to terms with the essential nature of an unfree society; then you can decide whether you can make your own cozy bargain with it (and these societies are past masters at bribe dangling) or kick its representatives downstairs as they deserve.

"Julia" uncovers the nature of a terror *régime* and how it affects even fringe people such as foreigners who are passing through its territories. To that extent it is true. It has important truths to tell and tells them. When are we finally going to get up-to-date with this question? C. S. Lewis, peace be unto him, writes somewhere of "the long process whereby Europe became aware of fiction as an activity distinct from history on the one hand and lying on the other." Did McCarthy ever get to that first base? Why did it matter to her, and to so many people, that Lillian Hellman appeared to be casting herself in a role she had not actually played? She was writing the story, recreating that scene, wasn't she? That thrill of cold horror as the stony-eyed frontier officials board the train that has suddenly fallen silent after hours of companionable drumming and creaking, the sweat, the problems of sphincter control, as the tread moves from compartment to compartment, the sudden expedients (opening the box of chocolates, etc.) that you try in the last few seconds—nowadays these things are enacted at airports, but in those days they happened in trains, and it becomes the province of literature to make us relive it.

Who—and I'm serious—will care about the exact identity of the individuals in the story? Or in any story? No doubt it would be a feather in the cap of a scholar who could prove beyond doubt the historical identity of Chaucer's Summoner or Pardoner, but who else would have a use for that feather? Certainly what that knowledge *wouldn't* do, wouldn't have a hope in hell of doing, would be to make *The Canterbury Tales* any more "true" than they already are. Their truth shines out from within. They show us a group of medieval people, of the widest diversity of rank and occupation, as they were and as they felt themselves to be, so that to inhabit *The Canterbury Tales* and its enveloping narrative is to inhabit the fourteenth century, know it, touch it, taste it. Names, dates, details of personal identity, are illuminating in another way. Same story everywhere: it might be fascinating, in some respects, to know whether Yossarian is based on a real individual or a blend of several, or (highly unlikely) imagined out of thin air, but nothing we are told could increase or diminish the uncanny success of *Catch-22* in conveying the surreal atmosphere, part desperate and part euphoric, of the last phase of World War II. Honesty? Dishonesty? Send the lawyers home.

I have been rather surly about Carol Brightman's book, so let me say that it is, at any rate, based on two premises with which I find myself in agreement. One is that most of McCarthy's fiction does not reach the first rank. And Brightman qualifies that this stricture does not necessarily apply to McCarthy's work in criticism, which, one gathers, does. The other premise is that McCarthy was able to make a valuable contribution to the intellectual life of her time "because her roots remained in another, more traditional world." In all this, I agree. Her birthdate, 1912, is important. She put her roots down before the soil was sprayed with chemical poisons. There is a rightness of touch, a sureness of direction, which she sometimes tried to get away from so as not to be left out of even the sillier vogues of the 1960s (*Naked Lunch*) but which tended to reassert itself when she wasn't looking. It was a wholesome instinct, precious above gold.

As a formal critic, she showed herself to be sound and rather unoriginal, which is right; criticism that goes after originality usually



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ends up in a morass of bright ideas. I had very low expectations of her series of Northcliffe Lectures delivered in 1980, *Ideas and the Novel*, but when I began to read it, I was soon reassured by finding it full of commonsense remarks that had been made many times before—which, when you have a reputation based on cleverness as she had, takes a certain courage. (Example: "Even when he shows vast social forms in motion (like Victor Hugo or Manzoni or Tolstoy), the novelist's care is for individual destinies, and it seems to be proper to the novel that they should be small destinies.")

As regards Miss Brightman's opinion that McCarthy's work is held back by its various deficiencies from attaining the finest quality but that her criticism isn't, I think I would take this further and say that all the features of her work that are good are in fact good as criticism. She was, naturally, a critic; the excitement that generates her work is primarily a critical excitement. When she sat down to write a novel, she tended to assemble her characters from materials amassed by observation rather than fish them up slowly and patiently from the deep instinctual reaches of imagination—a cruel, exhausting effort, but sometimes rewarded by peaks of achievement above one's normal "best"—she stopped short and made do with things she had noticed about people. About her friends, sometimes. Since, like most noticing people, she had a sharp eye for weakness and absurdity, the result often caused great pain. Sometimes McCarthy would feel a genuine regret at this, but she always felt it was ineluctably involved with her method of work. Hannah Arendt wrote her once a consoling letter about this tendency, designed to soothe her guilt feelings. "You are a critic, and so you must quote," the oracle intoned.

Precisely so. She was a critic. She thought like a critic, felt like a critic, perceived like a critic. And in that category she will have to remain. Miss Brightman wisely doesn't try to dispute it. She knows that what she is showing us is a critical and judging, rather than a creative, mind. Hence the bias toward satire, toward combat. If you haven't given birth to your characters, gestated them, carried them, and endured labor pangs for them, you care the less what happens to them. And the critical energy in McCarthy is impressive—clever, lively, worth paying attention to. In *A Charmed Life*, for instance, the characters, who are shown as a *cénacle* of intellectuals, continually come out with little homilies on cultural history that read like second-year student essays, but good ones. Without them the book would be unendurably thin, because the poverty of her portrayal of the inner life is, here as elsewhere, insurmountable.

Writing is a difficult art, and there is no need to be grudging about what any writer has given us. There is a considerable driving force behind McCarthy's books, a force beginning to fade now, but still perceptible if we approach it with sympathy. At least it was directed outward, not numbingly solipsistic, and it was (in its day) bright, fresh, and contributing. But the overall effect of this painstaking book is to remind me of a remark made by some composer (my memory wants to say Frederick Delius), who commented that, though he had traveled to many cities and walked in many town squares and public parks, he had never seen a statue to a critic.

# Bookman

"KING OF CRITICS": GEORGE SAINTSBURY, 1845–1933. *By Dorothy Richardson Jones. University of Michigan Press. $42.50.*

Reviewed by WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

In a telling phrase, Vladimir Nabokov once referred to John Galsworthy as a "stone-dead" English novelist. No English men of letters are more stone dead, so it would seem, than those who flourished a hundred years ago: most prominently and prolifically Andrew Lang, Edmund Gosse, and George Saintsbury. Yet the last of these has been the recipient of two tributes from modern men of letters with whom one doesn't like to disagree. T. S. Eliot dedicated *Homage to John Dryden* to him (Saintsbury himself wrote a still lively book on Dryden), praised his mighty edition of the Caroline poets, and remarked in passing that his *History of*

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*Criticism* was "always delightful, generally useful, and most often right." And in two short appreciations of Saintsbury, Edmund Wilson went further, calling him the sole full-length English professional critic of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries who was of first-rate stature (Wilson mentions Leslie Stephen as possibly another). Moreover Wilson directed attention where it should be directed—to Saintsbury as a writer who had created his own style and "personal rhythm," "a modern conversational prose that carries off asides, jokes and gossip." Wilson found charming and irresistible the way that style conveyed judgments about writers and their work: it was like eating peanuts, he confessed.

Wilson's remarks are now half a century old, and his expressed hope that some of Saintsbury's books would be made available in reprints has not come to pass. At present—with the exception of a few expensive items for libraries—Saintsbury is not to be found. It follows that he is unheard of by students and by many of their professors; certainly the younger ones whose assumption is, anyway, that criticism should be *hard*, reading it like eating not peanuts but the shells. What Wilson found impressive and engaging was Saintsbury's ability to read and criticize for their own sake innumerable English and French writers, especially such minor ones as George Crabbe or George Borrow or Thomas Peacock or William Cowper. Most academics today wouldn't be caught dead practicing such a non-theoretical leisure-class activity (though they might indulge themselves in a film or two) since such reading would stem from no more than a desire to appreciate "disinterestedly." And as we all know, disinterested reading has gone the way of the telegraph and slide rule.

Dorothy Richardson Jones, a professor emerita from Queens College, is of a generation that, in its undergraduate and graduate study of literature, was sent often to Saintsbury's histories and surveys and to his articles in the *Cambridge History of English Literature* on periods, prosody, and poets. She wrote her doctoral dissertation on the man way back in 1938; now she has given us a full, sympathetic, and not uncritical survey, in the old-fashioned sense, of Saintsbury's career in its large outlines and of the formidable array of books he produced over the course of a life of eighty-eight years. She confesses to having read all of his signed and a good portion of his unsigned writings (more than a hundred volumes, Saintsbury estimated), "something no one will do in the 1990's," she quite rightly remarks. This enormous production presents a real problem to a biographer (W. E. Henley called the articles on French writers that Saintsbury produced for the ninth edition of the *Britannica* in themselves "the labor of an ordinary lifetime").

How much time should be spent describing and summarizing the contents of books most of which Professor Jones's (few) readers won't have read? And what is to be made of a man's life who spent virtually all of it reading and writing? Professor Jones sees this overwhelming literary activity as Saintsbury's way of practicing a "life-long habit of evasion and escape from reality into literary fantasy and dreams." Although he married and fathered two children, neither his wife (who became an invalid) nor his sons seem to have touched him in the way books did.

At Oxford Saintsbury's academic hopes were dimmed when he received a second in "Greats" and failed to win a fellowship. There followed a decade of headmastering at less than top-rank schools, after which, in 1877, he settled in London and began the long parade of articles, reviews, and books. His early writing includes, among so much else, a history of French literature, the *Britannica* articles on French writers, and prefaces and bibliographical notes to the forty-volume English edition of Balzac's *Comédie humaine*. Professor Jones says that, compared to Saintsbury's commentaries on French literature, Matthew Arnold's essays on the subject seem restricted, lacking range and depth (Saintsbury later wrote a book on Arnold). He helped make French literature accessible to students—even though he had little sympathy with any writer subsequent to Baudelaire, indeed with literature written after 1880—and he did much editing and translating of French works. Professor Jones describes his life as a "hardworking journalist"—Saintsbury's words about himself as sub-editor of the *Saturday Review*. "It staggers the imagination to picture those crowded days and nights—the editorial work with long days and a long walk home, the steady flow of book packets for review after long nights of reading while the more lasting work for essays, prefaces, and surveys was also going on."



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In 1895 Saintsbury accepted the chair in English at the University of Edinburgh, taking over from Milton's biographer, David Masson. In his first academic year he delivered 150 lectures and continued, for twenty years, to lecture (without notes), grade papers and examinations, and administer with "an absolute and prompt conscientiousness" (in his biographer's words) his other academic chores. During his tenure at Edinburgh, Saintsbury produced his longest, most notable books, including the three-volume *History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, the equally thick three-volume *History of English Prosody* (and its accompanying *Historical Manual of English Prosody*), and his *History of English Prose Rhythm*. These enormous labors were accomplished without the aid of sabbaticals, Guggenheim grants, or other emoluments.

In the histories, as in his previous books, Saintsbury's critical "method" was scarcely that. Professor Jones defines it as "impressionistic, appreciative criticism, full of personal enthusiasm . . . regulated by the use of historical knowledge for constant comparisons." In his rewriting of Arnold's famous dictum, Saintsbury defined criticism as "the endeavour to find, to know, to love, to recommend, not only the best, but all the good, that has been known and thought and written in the world." And he spoke of his critical practice as "an endless process of correcting impressions—or at least checking and auditing them till we are sure that they are genuine, coordinated, and . . . consistent." One sees what T. S. Eliot would have admired in this sort of practice (comparison and analysis are the tools of the critic, said Eliot) as well as why current fashion should find it irrelevant or worse.

In a life so free of cataclysmic events and personal horrors as Saintbury's, the human details, when they come, stand out vividly. He was as overachieving a walker as he was a reader and scholar: twenty-five to thirty miles on an average day (can this really be?) until in his forties he broke a bone in his foot. As for reading—"*Pickwick*, Peacock, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Antiquary*, Southey's *The Doctor*, Jane Austen, Thackeray, and so forth, all these he *reread* once a year; the *Earthly Paradise* he read twenty times with unfading delight; *Gulliver* a hundred times; three hundred volumes of Gautier; all of the *Anti-Jacobin*; *The Anatomy of Melancholy* read twice through (it was 'not easy')." And there is the legend about his habit of reading a French novel before breakfast. He never stayed in bed after 8:00 A.M. and retired as late as 2:00 A.M., but he once remarked to Sir Herbert Grierson that he never worked after dinner. Grierson replied, "I often read a good deal then," to which Saintsbury retorted, with who knows what degree of mischief, "I do not regard reading as work.

There was also his wine cellar to keep up. Saintsbury's *Notes on a Cellar Book* not only classifies the wines but contains a commendable defense of gin. (Kingsley Amis's *On Drink* is an excellent descendant of Saintsbury's cellar book.) Speaking of these "defenses" against doubt and depression, Professor Jones says they were compounded of "the drive for omniscience, hard work, aesthetic enjoyment of beauty, wine, foods, the vicarious life of fiction, the retreat into past literature, and religious and political dogmatism" (he was Anglican and High Tory). It would take a sterner analyst than I to decide that Saintsbury really missed out on the more important aspects of life.

Edmund Wilson thought that *The Peace of the Augustans*—the superb guide to eighteenth-century writers that Saintsbury produced after he retired from Edinburgh—was the best introduction to his work. That seems reasonable, and a curious reader might go on to dip into the histories of prosody, criticism, and prose rhythm, looking at what Saintsbury has to say about particular writers (try the pages on Burke in *Prose Rhythm*, on Blake's *Poetical Sketches* in *Prosody*, on the Wartons in *Criticism*). But my own favorite passage in what I've read of him (a great deal less than Dorothy Richardson Jones) occurs in some brief remarks about teaching ("On the Teaching of English," in *George Saintsbury: The Memorial Volume*) to which Professor Jones doesn't refer. There he argues that lectures should be extempore, not written out, and should consist of "the continuous reading and commenting of texts" rather than airier disquisitions on more abstract matters. He sums up as follows:

> The absolutely ideal literary lecture or schoolhour would be the utterance of what the lecturer or master himself experiences when he reads some good verse or prose for the first time—a little "diluted," so to say, so as to bring it within the range of less trained organisms. The pleasure which he feels at the perfection of expres-



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sion, the critical doubt at its imperfection; the slight effort of memory needed to recall allusions or facts; the more serious intellectual exertion to explain difficulties and enlighten obscurities; the further reminiscence of passages in other writers which this recalls; the recognition of idiosyncrasy and felicity in rhythm and metre and style—all this should be, as it were, extruded from the teacher's own progress of thought and feeling, and thrown in spoken phantasmagoria on a screen for the audience's consideration.

Saintsbury admits that nobody but a literary archangel could do this perfectly, but insists that, still, it can be done: "And if anybody cannot do it at all, he has no business to be a teacher of English." I should like to think that, with such a challenge laid down, Saintsbury hasn't dated at all and that we very much need him today.

## The Clothes Have No Emperor

KAFKA'S CLOTHES: ORNAMENT AND AESTHETICISM IN THE HABSBURG *FIN DE SIÈCLE*. *By Mark M. Anderson. Oxford University Press. $52.*

Reviewed by JOHN D. BARLOW

In 1918, in one of his notebooks, Franz Kafka wrote, "I have vigorously absorbed the negative element of the age in which I live, an age that is of course very close to me, which I have no right ever to fight against, but as it were a right to represent." It is this particular absorption and representation that Mark Anderson, who quotes this passage in the introduction to his book, wants to adumbrate, concentrating upon Kafka's relation to clothing and the body to illustrate his general relation to the aestheticism and decadence of the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Given that Kafka's was a negative absorption, it is a challenging task. Though one may be disappointed about omissions and become impatient with what is included (too much on the art critic Schultze-Naumburg, J. P. Müller's gymnastic system, and body culture in general), the book is short and to the point and is in general interesting reading, characteristics not always found in other reworked versions of doctoral dissertations.

One of the photographs in the group of illustrations in the middle of *Kafka's Clothes* shows Franz Kafka in 1906 when he was about twenty-three, nattily dressed and very serious in a long jacket, with a necktie, high collar, large cuffs, and noticeable cuff links. His hair is neatly trimmed and combed, parted precisely in the middle. It would be the sort of illustration one would expect to find on the jacket of a book about the place of clothing in Kafka's writing. But the jacket shows instead a photograph from July 1914 of Kafka and another young man, possibly his friend the novelist Ernst Weiss, both with big smiles, sitting on a beach in their bathing suits. Kafka's friend sits upright, chest out and head up, his arms at his side, while Kafka leans forward, his arms in front of him holding one of his feet. Kafka's shoulders and especially his chest look frail and, at least in comparison to his friend, he seems to be hiding his body.

Before readers even start to read *Kafka's Clothes*, they see Kafka with virtually no clothes, very little ornament (his hair is parted), and comporting himself in a most unaesthetic way. It is an apt picture for the book that follows because it is such an accurate illustration of the kinds of negative relations Professor Anderson discusses. The negativity of Kafka's absorption in his own epoch is largely responsible for the fact that it usually comes as a surprise to most readers of Kafka to think of him in terms of the fin de siècle, of *Jugendstil* and decadence, of dandyism and the natty dresser shown in the middle of the book.

Much of Anderson's book deals with Kafka and his body. At times, readers may wonder if the title should not have been *Kafka's Body*, until they remember that its subject is to a large extent a negative one and that Kafka operated with such negatives, often establishing polarities such as marriage versus writing, praising one of them, as he did with marriage and having a family in his "Letter to His Father," as the best that a human being could do, and then in the end consigning himself to the other. Still, it is interesting to see the clear and often ubiquitous presence of clothes, both

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putting them on and taking them off, in Kafka's writings, especially, for example, in *The Trial.* When this novel begins, Josef K. is wearing his nightshirt. The warders who have come to arrest him make a big deal about what he should put on when he gets dressed. They take an interest in his "fancy underwear," for which they're punished later. Fräulein Bürstner's blouse is noticed dangling from the window latch. Frau Grubach darns a heap of old stockings. These kinds of details recur throughout the novel until, at the end, K. has to remove "his coat, his waistcoat, and finally his shirt," to be executed in a state of undress.

Along with the emphasis on clothing, in Kafka's fiction, Anderson finds a concentration on "Verkehr"—"traffic" in its many meanings—related to Kafka's father's clothing accessories store, cited by Franz as his first school in his "Letter to His Father." In Anderson's analysis, "Verkehr," taken in all its German meanings to refer to the "movement of people, goods, money, or information" and bringing together "traffic, trade, commerce, exchange, social and sexual intercourse," comes to underlie not only Kafka's attitudes toward clothes and the body, but much else besides, including his applications of the ideas of Adolf Loos and Karl Kraus, as well as Kafka's own complex relationship to Judaism and being Jewish. Chapters devoted to interpretations of *Amerika,* "The Metamorphosis," *The Trial,* "In the Penal Colony," and "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk," are primarily based on the working out of this concept even more than Kafka's specific concern with clothes and the body.

If readers keep in mind Kafka's "Letter to His Father" and the significance Kafka always attached to his father, there is clearly much that makes sense in all this. His father's store's "traffic in clothes" is a good representation of the complex of things from which Kafka recoiled and to which he set up his writing as an alternative: bourgeois respectability and responsibility, marriage, parenthood, business, career, property, productive citizenship. Anderson's most interesting analyses are in the chapters about "In the Penal Colony" and "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk." In his discussions of "In the Penal Colony," Anderson connects Kafka's rejection of ornamental writing in the spirit of Adolf Loos's campaign against ornament to Kafka's own physical, even narcissistic relationship to using his pen: writing, the unclothed body, and an individual's sense of his destiny all come together here in the colony's execution machine that kills by writing, in the most ornamental of scripts, the condemned person's sentence into his body. Coupling his analysis of the story with observations about Cesare Lombroso's farfetched criminological theories about "criminal types" and tattoos (writings on the body), Anderson sees "In the Penal Colony" as an indication of Kafka's commitment to an ascetic writing style and thus a final rejection of *Jugendstil* influences. At the same time, Kafka seems to be passing judgment on his own narcissism about writing, in Anderson's words, on "the social and ethical sterility of a life dedicated to, dependent on, and ultimately usurped by literary ambition." The chapter on "Josephine, the Singer, or the Mouse Folk" treats the story as Kafka's attempt to come to terms with his greatly ambivalent attitude to his Jewishness, particularly by absorbing some of Otto Weininger's stereotypes and using them affirmatively to revoke that hapless writer's anti-Semitism.

Theodor W. Adorno advised that one should pay more attention to "the incommensurable, opaque details, the blind spots" in Kafka's writings rather than struggling to probe the hidden meaning of such aspects of them as the digressions on the law in *The Trial,* as if they were elements of myth. In emphasizing clothing and the body in Kafka, Anderson is taking up such details in keeping with Adorno's advice: Josef K. stripping to his waist to be executed, the traffic-infested image of New York seen by Georg Bendemann, or Gregor Samsa's gymnastic agility in running playfully up and down the walls of his room and hanging from the ceiling.

What readers may find missing in Anderson's study is more about Kafka's relationships with other fin de siècle Habsburg writers and artists as well as comparisons with the more well-established dandies of the time, such as Oscar Wilde, who was widely read in the circles Kafka traveled in. Certainly, much of what Anderson discusses is also found in many aspects of Central European culture at the time: in Frank Wedekind, Thomas Mann, Peter Altenberg. Clothing is emphasized extensively in *Die Verstümmelten* (The mutilated) by Kafka's fellow Prague German Hermann Ungar.



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Such excursuses could have replaced some of the discussions of body culture, nudism, and criminology without harming the book at all. Finally, the parsimonious treatment of *The Castle* is regrettable. There's lots of "traffic" of all kinds in that novel, and it would have been interesting to read what Anderson would say about it.

## Mystical Union

THE GONNE-YEATS LETTERS, 1893–1938: ALWAYS YOUR FRIEND. *Edited by Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares. Norton. $35.*

Reviewed by JOHN P. SISK

This book is a boon for those readers (surely there are many) who have known Maud Gonne only as a legendary figure who emerges tantalizingly but not too specifically out of the Celtic twilight as they encounter the literature and politics of pre–World War II Ireland. In the hands of Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares she becomes specific enough but without ceasing to be legendary. Consider some of the specifics: an ardent nationalist, she was twice imprisoned; for a while she had to live disguised in Ireland; she carried secret papers to Russia for the French Boulangists and was suspected of being a British spy; she cooperated with a plot to assassinate King Edward VII and once proposed a Fenian scheme to blow up British troopships with bombs disguised as lumps of coal; she carried a revolver in Turkey; she lectured in France, Ireland, and America for the Irish cause; she was an actress, a journalist, and a painter; she had a private audience with Pope Pius X. Combining as she did the intellectual and cultural eminence of a Margaret Fuller or a Mary Wollstonecraft with the physical beauty of that bare-breasted firebrand in Delacroix's famous painting *Liberty Leading the People,* Maud Gonne belongs near the top of anyone's list of world-disturbing female activists.

The problem is that the book's title is unavoidably misleading. It begins and ends with a letter from Yeats, but only 30 of its 303 letters are from him, most of his letters to her having been burned with other papers when her house was raided by Free State soldiers. The editors—she a great granddaughter of Maud, he a biographer of Yeats—work valiantly and well to correct this imbalance with their introductory essays and with a judicious use of other sources of information: Yeats's letters to other people, his *Memoirs, Autobiographies, Mythologies,* and miscellaneous notebooks. Perhaps most important are the notes: seventy double-column pages that supply social, cultural, and political context for all references to person, place, and event, so that the reader who doesn't make the mistake of ignoring them gets a richly detailed picture of a half century of Irish life. Nevertheless, it remains more Maud Gonne's story than Yeats's since her voice predominates. It can be exasperating when during crucial periods in their relationship (for instance, during her brief and unhappy marriage to the Irish hero John MacBride) the voicelessness of Yeats's presence in the exchange is underlined for us with her "thank you for your letter."

Certainly a voicelessness in Maud Gonne's presence was the last thing Yeats aspired to after their first meeting in London on January 30, 1889, when they were both twenty-three years old. At that point, he wrote later, "the troubling of my life began." Yeats proposed marriage several times, the last time when they were in France together during the Easter Rising and after her painful separation from MacBride. Subsequently he even proposed to her daughter Iseult, the offspring of Maud's affair with the French politician Lucien Millevoye. The best he could manage with her was a mystic marriage—ironically enough, perhaps, given the extent to which he was caught up in the world of Celtic mysticism. Understandably, he wanted a less ethereal union. In fact, Jeffares and others suspect that after fifteen years their union did become physical. Suddenly, in December 1908, she is addressing him not as "My dear Mr. Yeats" or "My dear Willie" but as "Dearest." After eight letters, however, "Dear Willie" makes its return, and we can only assume that the re-

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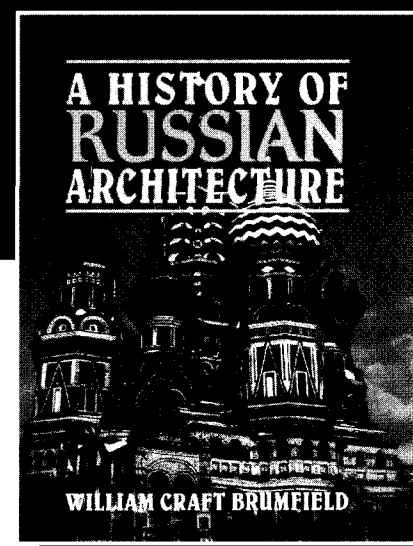


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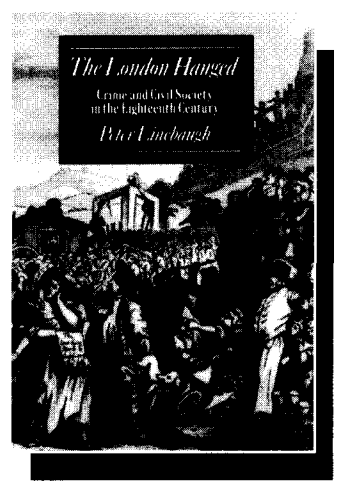


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lationship has reverted to mystical normality.

Early in their relationship Maud Gonne had made it clear that she was not the marrying kind and put little value on the physical aspect of love. "Material union," she told him, "is but a pale shadow" compared to their mystical marriage. Even her quickly regretted marriage to John MacBride seems to have been more a mystical union with the Free Ireland he symbolized than a material union—though it did have the material consequences of their son Sean, who later became active in the IRA. Here and elsewhere in Maud Gonne there are signs of the puritanism that characterizes what Bruce Mazlish has usefully defined as the revolutionary ascetic. She disliked the plays of John Synge and Sean O'Casey because of their vulgarity, bawdiness, and portrayal of contemptible characters, and she condemned Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* for its gratuitous coarseness. One can imagine her scolding Delacroix for those bare breasts, however she may have sympathized with the revolutionary passion for freedom that had left them that way.

In any event, being temperamentally inclined to speak out frankly, Maud Gonne never hesitated to scold dear Willie when she believed he was being insincere, wasting too much of his time and talent on the complicated business of the Abbey Theatre or as a senator for the Free State, especially when she did not agree with the positions he was taking (the Free State itself was a halfway settlement of which she did not approve). She read his poems and plays with intelligent enthusiasm, and no one could have agreed more that he deserved the 1923 Nobel Prize, but politics could always color her judgment. Thus she begins her reaction to his poem "Easter 1916" with "I don't like your poem, it isn't worthy of you & above all it isn't worthy of the subject"—the subject being the Easter Rising in which John MacBride was shot.

Given their political differences, it is a wonder that the mystical marriage survived. They both recognized, as Yeats put it in a late letter, "that we will never change each other's politics. They are too deeply rooted in our characters." An early recognition of this fact had led Maud to discourage him from mixing in the "*outer* side of politics"—the side of excitement and physical danger where she was most at home. For her, too, the outer side entailed an unqualified hatred of England that he could never share. This was the absolute principle she had in mind when in one of her scolding letters she urged him to "see the proportion of things." Her view of the proportion of things cannot be separated from her tireless efforts to alleviate the hardships of the victims of those turbulent times, but neither can it be separated from the plot to assassinate Edward VII. In her final analysis, the proportionate truth about John MacBride was not that he had been a barbarous husband but that he had died for Ireland and was therefore sacred.

"Dear Willie," of course, was thoroughly familiar with Maud's kind of proportionality. As he wrote to Lady Gregory, "Hers has been in part the war of phantasy and of a blinded idealism against eternal law." Years later he would tell Olivia Shakespeare, Ezra Pound's mother-in-law and another of his several female correspondents, that Maud "had to choose (perhaps all women must) between broomstick and distaff and she has chosen the broomstick." By this time, of course, his own concern with the proportion of things had made him all too sensitive to the conflict between blinded idealism and eternal law. We have a memorable record of the consequences of this conflict in "The Second Coming," where "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." Given Yeats's personality and apprehension that the center might not hold, it is not surprising that in politics he was often partial to the distaff side.

Early in the book the reader may wonder what sort of union they would have had if Maud had accepted one of Yeats's early proposals. Would there have been an accommodating reversal of orientation in the crucible of marriage, he moving closer to the broomstick and she to the distaff as they learned to see the proportion of things in the same terms? One suspects that Maud Gonne was right in her insistence on a mystical marriage. Such a union, despite its material frustrations, may nevertheless have been as enabling to his poetry as was his traffic with the spirit world. "Does the imagination dwell the most / Upon a woman won or woman lost?" he asks in *The Tower.* Certainly she fired his imagination, however lost to him she otherwise was.

This lovely and remarkable woman was too



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caught up in the urgent whirl of things to leave behind models of epistolary prose. The important thing, however, is her capacity to draw us into her passionately, if disproportionately, experienced world. Lovers of Yeats's poetry may be glad that he didn't marry her, but this generously illustrated book will help them understand why he wanted to.

## Surface Depths

MISCELLANEOUS VERDICTS: WRITINGS ON WRITERS, 1946–1989. *By Anthony Powell. The University of Chicago Press. $34.95.*

Reviewed by ALAN RUTENBERG

Anthony Powell is widely celebrated as the author of the twelve-volume novel *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951–1971) and as a distinguished member of the Oxford Wits, the well-chronicled, dandyish group formed at Oxford in the twenties, which included, among others, Evelyn Waugh, Cyril Connolly, and Harold Acton. So desperate are we at present for informed and polished criticism, and so dependent precisely on the aspect of celebrity, that two substantial collections, consisting primarily of Powell's fine yet brief book reviews, have recently been published in England; the present volume is the first. The dust-jacket commentary produced here by the University of Chicago Press neatly reflects this comic situation, announcing "writing in depth" on Kipling, Conrad, and Hardy, when in fact the book contains only a series of brief reviews on each of these authors, placed in chronological order.

Anthony Powell is certainly not to blame for our unsatisfied cultural requirements. His book consists largely of reviews he has written for the *Daily Telegraph* during the past forty years, and there is nothing in the least dishonorable about them. Powell displays within the quite small compass of these reviews, as well as in the several longer articles, a quietly refined, comic sensibility that is very much an evocation of a more civilized past.

Powell has divided the book into four sections: "The British," "The Americans," "My Contemporaries," and "Proust and Proustian Matters." His reviews consider biographies and memoirs, letters and diaries, essays and literary criticism, and they concern primarily the major and minor literary figures of the twentieth century. The biographical interest is dominant throughout, and in an especially entertaining aspect of the book, Powell also provides modest fragments of autobiography: particularly in the sections devoted to Americans and contemporaries, Powell's personal encounters with a variety of writers and other personalities amuse instructively.

Along with the series of reviews on Kipling, Hardy, and Conrad already mentioned, similar substantial collections of reviews address James, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald, among the Americans; Orwell, Connolly, and Waugh, among Powell's contemporaries; and of course Proust, who from diverse perspectives receives the most repeated attention. This catalogue correctly suggests that Powell's interests lie in the novel of manners and its traditional, often comic themes.

These reviews provide an interesting record of Powell's sustained attention to individual writers over a long period of time. On Henry James, for instance, Powell reviews four of the five volumes of Leon Edel's biography, and on Joseph Conrad, he considers many of the important biographies, collections of letters, and critical works of the recent past. This portrait of such continuous devotion presents the writer as a reader of a particular kind: not only a fan and an addict, as Powell describes his own relation to Proust, but also a craftsman, attentive to his own traditional duties.

Powell's criticism is most characteristic and personally distinctive in that portion of the first section devoted to John Aubrey and matters of genealogy, and in the last section on Proust. These sections are of additional interest because they illuminate Powell's concerns and intentions in *A Dance to the Music of Time*, which narrates, as comic social history, the origins, biographies, and manners of the English educated classes in the middle of the twentieth century.

V. S. Pritchett, who begins an essay on Powell by noting that one accepted description of his work is "Proust Englished by Wodehouse," finds the biographer John Aubrey the more significant influence. Powell is

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indeed a keen admirer of Aubrey, and in fact has written a biography entitled *John Aubrey and His Friends. Aubrey's Brief Lives*, a seventeenth-century collection of short biographies, gives Aubrey, according to Powell, "a claim to be considered the first English biographer, and sets him beside Boswell as an equal—though on the whole very different—master of the biographical art." Powell's description of Aubrey's own life indeed establishes an immediacy of contact between the seventeenth-century biographer and the twentieth-century chronicler of English society, who applauds "Aubrey's wide acquaintance in London and the country, his innumerable relations, his membership of the Royal Society, his knowledge of history, his love of gossip, and—above all—his genius for the apt phrase."

The placement of individual biographies amidst the layers of society past and present is the very substance of the chronicle novel, from Trollope to Proust. For Anthony Powell one compelling though clearly unfashionable instrument for accurately locating and interpreting individual lives is the traditional study of genealogy. He writes:

> If genealogy is anything else but simply and solely the truth about ancestors, it is worthless. This may sound an obvious statement, but it is one that has not always been taken to heart. The truth, however, often produces a most surprising picture in this, as in many other branches of study. Commonly thought of as a pursuit best adapted to keeping the various classes of society apart, it is scarcely too much of a paradox to say that the chief lesson of genealogy is to show how extraordinarily close the classes are—and have always been—together.

Here the concerns of the amateur enthusiast of genealogy and the worldly social novelist coincide. Powell's genealogical interests appear frequently throughout this volume, even in brief reviews, most often in order to correct the inaccurate use of names and titles. Powell offers these careful instructions as a matter of the importance of detail; he is concerned both with the conservation of an arcane but valuable historical resource and, more generally, with a perhaps outmoded intellectual morality that demands strict attention to accuracy.

Marcel Proust manipulates quite different temporal instruments in his "chronicle novel covering several generations," as Powell describes *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Yet perhaps the most compelling section of the present volume is the set of reviews and essays on Proust and related writers, all of which demonstrate Powell's avid interest, as craftsman and enthusiast, in Proust's life and work.

The first review in the Proust section compares illustrated editions of Proust and Galsworthy (as readers of *A Dance to the Music of Time* are aware, Powell has a considerable interest in painting, and in fact the title of the novel comes from Poussin). The comparison of these chronicle novelists is balanced and fresh, noting, for instance, the frivolity that allowed Proust to become a pure artist and the high seriousness that limited Galsworthy to the role of a writer "with a purpose." The review is a fascinating exercise not least because it originally appeared in 1950, the year prior to the publication of the first part of Powell's own chronicle novel, and it previews some of his major themes.

A recent profile of the novelist Henry Green reported speculation that Green had served as the model for Charles Stringham, one of the major characters in Powell's long novel, and it is precisely this sort of speculation that Powell addresses in his reviews of both volumes of George Painter's important Proust biography. Powell describes with some appreciation the investigations Painter made in order to discover the complicated and mixed sources of Proust's characters, and he emphasizes that Proust "wrote a novel rather than a thinly veiled fictional account of certain people who actually existed." Reviewing a biography of Robert de Montesquiou, the primary model for Proust's Baron de Charlus, Powell comments: "The striking conclusion one arrives at is that Charlus has real life and tragedy about him, while Montesquiou, talented as he was, remains a trifle absurd, almost a figure in cardboard. In other words, Proust used that extraordinary power that is called art to create Charlus."

In an essay on food and drink in Proust's novel, Powell, a great wine enthusiast, finds comic frustration in Proust's failure to specify with proper precision the wines that accompany the numerous formal dinners of the novel. Powell also provides this note of characteristic wit: "When Proust moved from the Boulevard Haussmann, the cork walls were sold to a manufacturer of bottle-corks. What a



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chance to combine bibliographical association with wine snobbery! 'Smell the cork of this Chambertin '23, my boy, not much of that noble vintage left now—and the cork itself once lined Proust's bedroom.'"

The remainder of the reviews in the Proust section certify Powell as a devoted Proustian and an exemplary reader. Powell considers the following works with evident pleasure: a memoir by Mina Curtiss that describes the people she met in the course of her search for Proust's letters; a biography of Anatole France, the prototype of Bergotte in Proust's novel; a diary of the Dreyfus case by Maurice Paléologue, a diplomat who supplied the model for Proust's Monsieur de Norpois; and a biography of George Sand that derived from the fact that her novels were the first adult books given to Proust. Finally, Powell treats sympathetically and without snobbery the difficulties faced in Harold Pinter's Proust screenplay, on which he comments: "For the Proust addict an enormous effort is required to accept that, if *À la recherche* ever reaches the screen, the overwhelming majority of those who see it will start entirely from scratch, without the smallest knowledge of the writer, or his characters. So certain simplifications in the story must take place."

According to V. S. Pritchett, Powell himself is properly located within the specific tradition that Pritchett describes as the "masculine tradition" in English comedy. In *George Meredith and English Comedy*, Pritchett writes that the masculine tradition "runs from Fielding, Scott, Jane Austen, Trollope, George Eliot and on to Kipling, Wells, Waugh, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Anthony Powell." He continues: "It is sanguine, sociable, positive, morally tough, believes in good sense and suspects sensibility."

These are indeed among the distinctive qualities of Anthony Powell as a novelist and critic. In response to such qualities, one would certainly not say of him, as a novelist recently has said in praise of Henry James, that he "becomes, more and more compellingly, our contemporary, our urgency." Yet perhaps there remains an honored place in our culture for that which is not contemporary and urgent. Powell's admirable criticism is certainly traditional in form and gentlemanly in manner, and it is stated with an unusual degree of balance, wit, and sanity. To his honorable, attentive interest in craft, Powell joins an urbane

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pose of amiable modesty and amateur enthusiasm, and in this pose, neither urgent nor contemporary, lies a great portion of his immense attractiveness.

## The Magician

THIS IS ORSON WELLES. *By Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich. HarperCollins. $30.*

Reviewed by JOHN SIMON

American cinema has produced a number of legendary figures, though most of them were like a movie close-up: larger than life but flat. Many were stars, some were directors; still others achieved public fame through their private lives. But none of them enjoyed such multifarious celebrity, such diversified charisma, such a romantic aura of tragic failure—but also of success within that failure—as Orson Welles. Without an exotic foreign accent, without providing anything more scandalous than a goodly number of affairs with and marriages to celebrated beauties, and without having been a sex symbol (that great shortcut to quasi-immortality), Orson Welles became something even better than a living legend: a certifiable genius.

The key to it all is precisely the diversity. A Garbo or a Gable or a John Ford was, after all, only one thing. But look at Welles: famous actor of stage, screen, and radio; dazzling director of stage, screen, and radio; playwright, screenwriter (though often uncredited), producer, and entrepreneur; magician in almost the Houdini class; cultural and political figure as lecturer, debater, and media commentator; civil rights activist; enfant terrible who stood America on its head with a panic-engendering radio broadcast; *auteur* of the only American film that is both critically and popularly, both nationally and internationally, recognized as a masterwork; handsome leading man who turned into a leviathan of a character actor—Fredric March and Sydney Greenstreet in one; one of the prime purveyors of Shakespeare to the masses; beloved, ballooning camp figure on late-night television in later life; finally, one of the most famous voices in TV commercials: melodious, resonant, the George Gershwin of the spoken word.

And over and above that, tragic: such enormous talent gone ultimately to waste. Whether one sees him as the victim of his own genius, which Hollywood had to cut down to size if not annihilate, or as an obstinately megalomaniacal non-compromiser, and his own worst enemy; or whether one remembers him chiefly as the genius in exile, going from pillar to post in cheap foreign movies—a kind of Graham Greene wastrel-hero drunk on his own failure, the stuff of legend clings to him. It bloats him to his tremendous girth and lets him die almost more famous for not having made those great movies that were—surely!—still in him, that he sometimes shot parts of, but could not raise the money to finish. And if one argues that, perhaps, had he lived a little less high off the hog—the best hotels, the finest restaurants, the most expensive women—he might have accomplished more, one is told peremptorily that that is part of being a misunderstood genius: stiffed by the world, he must be allowed to pamper himself.

Yes, it is all true, or at least true enough, as our collective memory, bolstered by several books about him, who has been dead only eight years, keeps reminding us. And he held still more trump cards: as wit and raconteur, as his own best publicist. Even that he reached only the biblical three-score-and-ten (1915–1985) contributes to his lopsided apotheosis: he did not slowly sink into the morass of oblivion that sucks in so many Hollywood greats. He managed to combine and sustain the mutually exclusive notorieties of wunderkind, grand old man, and prematurely cutoff tragic hero. Name me such another!

All that, plus something more, emerges from *This Is Orson Welles*, by Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich, which may be, in its somewhat clumsily composite way, one of the half-dozen best books about Hollywood. It begins with a preface by Jonathan Rosenbaum, the book's editor, and ends with a set of notes and comments by him. In between, there is a lengthy introduction by Bogdanovich, who, whatever one may think of him as a filmmaker and writer, has all the ingredients of a Boswell

✪ JOHN SIMON is the author of *Something to Declare: Twelve Years of Films from Abroad; Reverse Angle: A Decade of American Films; Paradigms Lost: Reflections on Literacy and Its Decline;* and *The Sheep from the Goats: Selected Literary Essays.*



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to Welles's Johnson; there follows the series of ample interviews Bogdanovich conducted at various places and times, meant to evolve into his own book about Welles. Also a detailed, almost exhaustive chronology of Welles's career compiled by Rosenbaum (who is a film critic and scholar), and the missing parts of the original screenplay of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, as reconstructed by Bogdanovich and Rosenbaum.

Of course, the most valuable part of the book is the interviews. As a film historian and incipient Welles biographer—and as a Hollywood figure in his own right—Bogdanovich knew all the right questions to ask and, as Welles's friend, could dare to ask them. He was able to follow down the byways, back alleys, and obiter dicta through which Welles led him, kept asking more questions, and was not to be shaken off without at least a reasonable facsimile of a full answer. The only thing missing (what a loss!) is a set of negative comments about some colleagues, and some uncosmeticized language, all of which Rosenbaum wanted to print, but Bogdanovich would not let him, invoking Orson Welles's own injunction against publishing that stuff. But Bogdanovich forgets that a dead Welles might be less concerned about letting it all hang out than a living one.

Two things characterize Welles's trajectory through life: a voracious appetite for doing things and fairly consistent bad luck. This is apparent on page after page of the present volume, as is his talent as a talker. But we also find here a man of imposing intellect—that rarest thing among actors, a thinker. Not necessarily a consistent, systematic thinker, but one who, in the McLuhan mode, throws out challenging ideas with no fear of contradicting himself.

For example, Welles makes the interesting observation that what the camera "does uniquely well is to *photograph thought*. . . . The camera is not so much a lie-detector as a Geiger counter of mental energy. . . . Every time an actor *thinks*, it goes right on the film." A nice idea, and eminently believable, but preceded immediately by a disquisition on "the famous differences between stage acting and acting for the camera" being all nonsense: "There's just good acting and bad." And Welles proceeds to discuss Gary Cooper's being a better movie actor than Laurence Olivier, who "fine as he's been in films [has] never been more than a shadow of that electric presence which commands the stage." People who recall Olivier in *Rebecca*, *The Entertainer*, *Henry V*, and *Richard III*, among others, will disagree. Still, this is an area where opinions may differ.

If the camera's specialty is registering thought, does that mean that Gary Cooper's superiority is based on his being a more thinking actor than Olivier? It is, rather, that "Cooper was a movie actor—the classic case," which depends on "personality. I wouldn't presume to explain that mystery." So then it isn't thought, is it? And if there is such a thing as being a movie actor, what does that make of the statement about there being no stage and movie acting, only good acting and bad?

Before we conclude that this is all balderdash, and wonder, given the ratiocinative powers of most actors, how the camera could register thought, let us note that Welles, by the very fact of grappling with such theoretical, cerebral concepts, proves himself more thoughtful than the vast majority of actors, and most American directors as well. Is that because he spent so much time in Europe? I think not; rather, it is the very thing that forced him into becoming a cinematic expatriate.

Consider for a moment Welles the literary critic. When Peter Bogdanovich asks him why Mark Twain hasn't dated, he answers, "Because Twain wasn't writing about children in a middle-class atmosphere. He put them into a kind of invented anarchistic world where middle-class values only exist in parody, and very much on the periphery of things—out in the wilderness, on the river and in caves, and not on Main Street under the shadow of the elms." He goes on to describe him as a giant who wrote a lot of unreadable trash: "It's only his masterpieces that last." This explains succinctly why Huck Finn is so much greater than Tom Sawyer—as perceived by the filmmaker who, in Hollywood, was a Huck among Toms.

Or take this: "Brecht had an extraordinary brain. You could tell he had been educated by the Jesuits—he had the kind of disciplined brain characterized by Jesuit education. Instinctively, he was more of an anarchist than a Marxist, but he believed himself a perfect Marxist." That goes to the essence of Brecht as clearly and concisely as anyone has managed. And again, on Dickens: "Dickens was an actor—and he was not a writer who acted, he was



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an actor who wrote." How well this captures Dickens's lifelong fascination with actors, actresses, and theater and explains why his public readings from his works were so successful. Above all, it illuminates Dickens's mode of storytelling, his very style.

Welles is equally on target closer to home. Thus on the vexed question of the weird sisters: "The witches don't really *prophesy*—they give Macbeth ideas which *make* things happen." Brilliant, but disputable: how, then, do the witches know about Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane? Are they also advisers on strategy to Malcolm and Macduff? Nevertheless, there is something to this: things do happen, at least in part, because we wish them to, and the witches may be armchair strategists as well as psychologists. And how about this:

> Lear clearly knows nothing about women and has never lived with them at all. His wife is dead—she couldn't exist. Obviously, the play couldn't happen if there were a Mrs. Lear. He hasn't any idea of what makes women work—he's a man who lives with his knights. He's that all-male man whom Shakespeare—who was clearly very feminine in many ways—regarded as a natural-born loser in a tragic situation. Othello was another fellow like that. Total incomprehension of what a woman is. The whole treatment of [Desdemona] when he kills her is the treatment of a man who's out of touch with reality as far as the other sex is concerned. All he knows how to do is fight wars.

One may agree or not, but there is manifestly a sharp and self-reliant intellect at work here. I cannot imagine Welles, good reader of other things as he was, spending time on perusing academic interpretations of Shakespeare.

The understanding he brings to fiction and drama is what Welles lavishes on movies. Every judgment on individual films, except his dismissal of *Outcast of the Islands* (but then, he regarded Conrad as personal property), strikes me as unimpugnable. Here he is on Buñuel: "He is a deeply Christian man who hates God as only a Christian can. . . . I see him as the most supremely religious director in the history of the movies." Welles knows, as only the great film directors do, that "the true shape of a film is musical." And what could be more enlightened than this comment:

> There is no "film culture," Peter—just an awful lot of films. We must "keep up with things," of course, but with the whole, wide world—not just the movies. We must find out what we can about this place we're living in—this place in time—but we've got to be awfully careful . . . never to make ourselves too perfectly a part of it. Modishness is a sure sign of the second-rate. We're finally to be judged not by our degree of involvement in the mainstream, but by our individual response to it. . . . I stay away from most [films] out of sheer self-protection, to cherish what's left of my innocence. . . . At my age, virginity is rather fragile. . . . Everything's been done, you mean? No, that's not the problem. The trouble is that everything's been *seen.*

What the book does most dramatically—sometimes as tragicomedy, sometimes as melodrama, sometimes as black farce—is to convey how Hollywood hounded, hobbled, and very nearly destroyed Welles, as punishment for his giving it its one undisputed masterpiece, *Citizen Kane.* Because it aroused the ire of the evil Hearst empire, and because it did not turn into an immediate box-office bonanza for RKO, Welles was thenceforth to be policed and penalized every step of the way. The most drastic example of this is the mangling of *The Magnificent Ambersons* (whose uncut version Welles was to consider ever after his magnum opus), cut from 132 minutes to 88, and the unused portion ordered destroyed by the RKO studio head, Charles Koerner. Similarly, *Journey into Fear* was cut from 91 minutes to 69, *The Stranger* from 115 to 95, *Touch of Evil* from 108 to 93, and so on and on.

Why? Because the Hollywood sages, then as now, could not understand the importance of atmosphere, texture, enriching detail. To them, anything that did not contribute directly to advancing the plot as speedily and two dimensionally as possible existed only as something to carpet the cutting-room floor with. Yet this is the supreme difference between film as art and film as commodity: the three-dimensionality that does not palpably further the action. "I like digressions," Welles tells Bogdanovich. "Look at Gogol. Read the first few pages of *Dead Souls* again and you'll see how one mad little digression can give reverberation and density to ordinary narrative." By taking out everything that made Welles's movies interesting except the action, Hollywood sabotaged film after film. It wasn't even cutting, Welles thought; it was more like run-



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ning through his movies with a broken lawn mower. In most cases, Welles would be removed from the film, kept out of the studio, and replaced by a hack, and his painstakingly detailed letters about how to edit the film left unread.

On the other hand, Welles could be an overreacher and not always reliable in financial matters. At age eleven, at the Todd School for Boys (his only formal education), he acted in various pageants the parts of the Virgin Mary, Christ, and Judas Iscariot. On the radio show "The March of Time," he played the voices of all five Dionne quintuplets. In *Oliver Twist* on "Mercury Theater on the Air," he was both Oliver and Fagin. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, he played both the murderer and the detective. As an actor at Dublin's Gate Theatre, in his late teens, he reviewed his own performances under a pseudonym. But when, in 1954, he wrote an article for the French magazine *Arts*, "Je combats comme un Géant dans un monde de nains pour le cinéma universel," the dwarfs had their revenge. When the article appeared in English (in *Film Culture*), the title shrank to a prosaic "For a Universal Cinema."

Bits and pieces of Orson Welles are still dribbling out into posthumous limelight: here a longer version of an old movie, there a screenplay that was never filmed. "Oh, how they'll love me after I am dead," he predicted—accurately. *This Is Orson Welles* is full of new anecdotes that confirm Orson as what he really was: a magician. "I guess I'm the highest paid magician in the world," he said, adding modestly, "Certainly the best." And he quotes the most famous magician of all time, Robert Houdin, on what a magician is: "A great actor playing the part of a magician." Orson, who was too hammy to be a great actor, was a great magician playing the part of an actor, and we believed him.

But he was, often, a great director. And he could, perhaps, finally have made it, if only Hollywood hadn't changed. As he told Gore Vidal (see "Remembering Orson Welles" in *United States*), "They always ask me, aren't you glad, *cher maître*, that the old studio system is finished, that there are no more vulgar furriers controlling your films? And I say, my God, how I miss them! Even Harry Cohn. When you make fifty-two pictures on an assembly-line basis, there is always room for an Orson Welles film. But now there is no room anywhere."

*Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature*
*Lloyd Davis, editor*

The authors in this book examine the figure of the virgin, a symbol central to many aspects of society and sexuality in nineteenth-century England, and its effects on the Victorian literary imagination.

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One hopes, though, that the film he was working on during his last years, *The Other Side of the Wind*, will, however fragmentarily, see the light of day. The trouble with a lot of Welles films is that the rights are snarled up between his daughter Beatrice and the mistress of his last twenty years, Oja Kodar—the only member of Welles's entourage I ever met, and lovely and charming she seemed. So there you have it: Orson-Orpheus posthumously torn apart by the Maenads, unlucky even after death.

But let's not end a piece on the great illusionist, raconteur, and hilarious conman on a sour note. Rather, let's pull out of the many anecdotes the one about how he entered his movie of *Othello* in the Cannes festival, where each film has to have a country of origin. Since Italy, France, and the United States had other entries, Welles, because he had shot it mostly in Morocco, entered it as a Moroccan film. But let him tell it:

I was sitting in my hotel room, and the director of the festival, Robert Favre Le Bret, called me on the phone and said, "What's the Moroccan



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national anthem?" And that was how I knew I'd won the first prize. Because they always play the national anthem of the winning country. And, of course, there *is* no Moroccan national anthem, or wasn't then, so they played something out of *Chu Chin Chow* or something, and everybody stood up. There was no Moroccan delegation or anything. I think I'm the sole winner in the Arab world of a great international prize.

## Sex in the Head

GERALD BRENAN: THE INTERIOR CASTLE, A BIOGRAPHY. *By Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy. Norton. $35.*

Reviewed by JEFFREY MEYERS

Gerald Brenan (1894–1987)—who survived into his nineties and lived as long as his friends Bertrand Russell, E. M. Forster, and Leonard Woolf—had a fascinating life. Born in Malta, where his father was an army officer, he witnessed in early childhood the glorious days of the British raj in South Africa, India, and Ceylon. His father, after being invalided out of the army for deafness, turned into a domestic martinet. His incessant criticism and frequent explosions made things miserable for his family, who lived in England amidst their oriental clutter: embossed trays, brass frogs, and elephants' feet. After a solid education at Radley, Brenan escaped from his rigid restraints and conventional background and—heading for Central Asia—walked as far as the wild mountains of Bosnia.

The Great War saved him from an Orwellian career in the Indian police and propelled him into combat. He took part in the Somme offensive, the bloodiest battle of the war, where he won a Military Cross and a Croix de Guerre. He enjoyed the continuous excitement and, though wounded in action, survived with no emotional scars. His small military pension helped him to defy his father and cut loose from his family. Though relatively poor for most of his life, he achieved unusual freedom, and never had to work at a regular job.

Brenan had a great many loyal and interesting friends, both in and out of Bloomsbury, traveled on foot throughout Spain (once sharing a train carriage with a flock of sheep), and lived mainly in the Mediterranean. He enjoyed good health and (despite a traumatic circumcision and frequent bouts of impotence) loved a number of attractive women. He developed a clear, engaging prose style, became an authority on the history and culture of Spain, published several important books, and kept writing well into his eighties.

When I first met him near Málaga in January 1972, I knew very little about his personal life and found him charming and engagingly frank, eager to please and to be liked. Gerald—a thin, wiry, and remarkably lively man—was bald, white haired, pink skinned. He had a round face, fleshy protruding ears, and a long upper lip. He dabbed at his thin lips with a colored handkerchief as saliva dribbled from his mouth. As we talked, the intellectually curious and extremely energetic septuagenarian would suddenly spring out of his hard chair and dash upstairs to find a quotation or a reference in a book. Sweet-tempered, enthusiastic, kind, he read my early literary essays and gave me valuable encouragement and professional advice. Until I met Gerald, authors like Russell, Forster, and Woolf seemed to me as distant and unapproachable as stars in the solar system. But they had been his personal friends. By bringing them down to earth and making them come alive, he increased my understanding as a reader, writer, and teacher.

Since Gathorne-Hardy's biography is based on Brenan's voluminous correspondence with friends in England and uses familiar episodes from his two attractive autobiographies—*A Life of One's Own* (1962) and *Personal Record, 1920–1972* (1974)—it is bound to be interesting. It is thoroughly researched, knowledgeable about Spain, and written in a generally lively style. At 660 pages, the book, however, is far too long and repetitive. Gathorne-Hardy tries to include all the events of Brenan's life, no matter how trivial. He wallows in pedantic details and writes, for example: "[Brenan] then had to go to London for three days, but on 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18 July he had [Gamel] to tea and they talked into the evening (fortunately their rooms were in adjoining cot-

✪ JEFFREY MEYERS has recently published biographies of Lawrence, Conrad, and Poe. His life of Scott Fitzgerald will be published by HarperCollins in early 1994.



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tages)." But he does not tell us what they actually talked about. He describes a trip through Europe by stating: "They reached Venice on 25 May, did north Italy, then drove along southern France and down Spain, arriving back at Alhaurín on 5 June." This covers the route, but again provides boring details instead of significant content, and gives no sense of what it was like to travel with Brenan. He tells us that Brenan trounced his academic rival Allison Peers with a spirited counterattack in the *Spectator,* but he does not mention what Brenan actually said.

Gathorne-Hardy's concern with insignificant detail in the end swamps whatever coherent pattern might emerge from the account of Brenan's life, and his book often lapses into an endless series of loosely connected events. Although he usefully distinguishes between what Brenan wrote and what really happened, he spends far too much time on Brenan's casual and meaningless sexual encounters. Gathorne-Hardy fusses over his subject like a doting nanny and introduces himself (as well as his ancestors and relatives) into the text. Many pages contain self-indulgent and irritating footnotes, which he has not been able to integrate into the narrative but apparently could not bear to leave out. The notes are sketchy, the bibliography inadequate, the index poor. In a notable howler, Gathorne-Hardy says that Edmund Wilson and his mother visited Brenan in 1954—although Mrs. Wilson died in 1951.

Although he appeared to live as a bohemian and was free to pursue his intellectual interests and write his books without conventional restrictions, Brenan's relations with women were central to his life and followed a recurrent pattern. He was drawn into the Bloomsbury circle by his tormented and obsessional liaison with Dora Carrington, a puzzling predator—half nymph, half nymphomaniac—who had the best documented and least satisfactory love affairs of our time. "So long as I had hopes and she knew it," Brenan wrote in *Personal Record,* "she would find the means to make me suffer." He pursued her for eight years, and when he finally managed to seduce her and satisfy himself, she brusquely asked, "Have you finished?" and abruptly left the room. He escaped from her only by burying himself in the remote mountain fastness of Yegen, his village in southern Spain.

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Unlike Carrington—who was not especially attractive, had a boyish body, was physically unresponsive, guilty about sex, married to his best friend, and hopelessly in love with Lytton Strachey—Juliana Pelegrina, the poorest girl in Yegen, was sensual, passionate, and completely uninhibited. In 1931 she gave birth to Brenan's illegitimate daughter Miranda, who was brought up by Brenan and his American wife Gamel Woolsey. After a miscarriage and two abortions, Gamel was unable to bear children.

All Brenan's affairs had strong elements of masochism and voyeurism. He seemed compelled to surrender his woman to another man and then vicariously participate in the fulfillment of another's pleasure. The masochistic element in his relations with Carrington recurred with Gamel. She was in love with the tubercular novelist Llewelyn Powys, who could not leave his wife and nurse. Despite all his suffering with Carrington, Brenan returned to live in Powys's Dorset village after his marriage in 1931 so that Llewelyn could continue his affair with Gamel. After Brenan abandoned marital relations with his wife, which began to appear as a sort of incest, he fell incestuously in love—first with his adolescent daughter, then with the niece of his former mistress.

It is scarcely surprising, under the circumstances, that his marriage to Gamel deteriorated rapidly. He found nothing to say to her; she gave up writing and began to drink heavily. The travel writer Honor Tracy moved in with them, fell in love with Gamel, and quarreled fiercely with Brenan while Gamel suffered an excruciating death from cancer. Just as his marriage to Gamel had repeated the sexual torments of his affair with Carrington,



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so in his relationship with his last companion, Lynda Price, who moved in right after Gamel's death in 1968, he resumed the role of protector, supporting a delicate, dependent, passive, and poetical woman.

Gathorne-Hardy misinterprets two important events that occurred toward the end of Gerald's life. In 1972 Lynda—who lacked a literary background and had a limited knowledge of Spanish—was, as Gerald told me, working with him on translations of the poems of San Juan de la Cruz. In order to give her status and establish her literary reputation, Gerald published their translations, in his 1973 book on the Spanish mystic, under her name. But these translations were surely a collaborative effort, more his work than hers. His tin-eared biographer, fond of Lynda and indebted to her for the help she gave him on the book, absurdly calls "her" translations superior to the dazzling versions by Roy Campbell.

When living in London in June 1984, I was distressed to read in the *Times* that Lynda, after marrying a Swedish painter who had moved into Gerald's house, was no longer able or willing to care for the sick old man. The article suggested that they had evicted him from his own house and sent him to a nursing home in Pinner, north London, to die. When I visited Gerald, he told me that he did not want to become a burden to Lynda. But he also missed her terribly, felt she did not love him, and was saddened that she had sent him away.

Gathorne-Hardy claims that Gerald had wanted to leave Spain and settle near his friends (most of whom were dead) in England, and says that the nursing home was "ideal." But he immediately contradicts his own account by stating that Lynda and her husband had always wanted to live alone (in Gerald's house, in other words, but without Gerald in it), that the journey from central London out to Pinner was for his visitors a "nightmare," and that Gerald wanted more than anything else to be close to Lynda. I had the unmistakable impression that he had been sent away against his wishes and was allowed to return home only when the Spanish authorities—under the pressure of adverse publicity about the treatment of their national treasure—had assumed responsibility for caring for him.

Gathorne-Hardy's "central thesis" is that, "as a result of his [repressive] childhood and school experiences, Gerald withdrew deeply into himself, into that 'interior castle' " described by St. Teresa. But this thesis is unconvincing. Throughout his life the essentially gregarious Gerald was torn between the desire to conceal and the need to reveal his deepest feelings, and there is abundant evidence of his powerful impulse toward self-revelation in his letters, travel books, and autobiographies. This biography gives many examples of Gerald's deep-rooted voyeurism, which eventually supplanted his sexual urge and—more than anything else—explains his natural curiosity, his sexual frustration, his relations with all his young women, and his preference for imaginative rather than physical pleasures.

Gerald never finished his life of St. Teresa and wrote four unsuccessful novels (the second of which sold only thirty copies). But his best books evolved from his long experience in Spain: *The Spanish Labyrinth* (1943), which kept the flame of truth alive when the history of that country was purely Fascist and is still one of the most perceptive and reliable accounts of the Civil War; *The Face of Spain* (1950), a description of his three-month tour after the war, which includes an influential chapter on the death of Lorca; *The Literature of the Spanish People* (1951), an over-enthusiastic but authoritative literary survey; and *Personal Record*, his unpretentious and lively autobiography.

*South from Granada*—an account of Brenan's seven years in the village of Yegen and a description of its folklore, festivals, people, quarrels, and love affairs—is his finest book. In the fall of 1919 he wrote: "I had just been demobilized and was looking for a house where I could live for as long as possible on my officer's bounty." He went to Spain to educate himself and to write. He became deeply attached to the serene and timeless atmosphere of the village and to its magnificent views of the mountains and the sea. He portrayed himself, with studied casualness, as rough, earnest, and independent; also rather muddled, careless with money, and extremely poor. Curious and self-educated, he was interested in nature and common folk as well as in archaeology, history, and poetry. "I was immune to loneliness," he said in *Personal Record*, "so long as I



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had books to read, mountains to climb and Spanish country people to talk to."

The style and structure of the book matched Brenan's character. He was offhand and informal; combined anecdote with history, experience with learned references. He chose not to describe the visits of Roger Fry and Bertrand Russell, as he had vividly described those of Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf, because his book was "coming to an end." *South from Granada,* which I think is the best book on Spain, records a disappearing culture. It is an affectionate and moving tribute to "a pattern of living which, though rude and primitive, was worth preserving."

Gathorne-Hardy has not been able to place *South from Granada* in the travel-writing tradition. He fails to discern even a trace of D. H. Lawrence's influence, though he states that Lawrence and Brenan "had the same instinctive sense of place and people." He also introduces his discussion of *South from Granada* with an intensely Lawrencean passage from Gerald's letters: "The qualities I most appreciate in writers [are] the lyrical gift, the warmth in human matters, the sense of beauty of the world, of the delight in being alive." Gathorne-Hardy does not mention that Brenan gives the hero of his novel *The Lighthouse Always Says Yes* (1966) the same name—Richard Somers—as the hero of Lawrence's *Kangaroo.* And he does not recognize that the last phrase from Gerald's letter is a deliberate echo of the conclusion of Lawrence's *Apocalypse*: "For man, the vast marvel is to be alive."

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## Pound for Pound

SHYLOCK: A LEGEND AND ITS LEGACY. *By John Gross. Simon & Schuster. $25.*

Reviewed by ROBERT M. ADAMS

In *Shylock,* John Gross has written a full—a capacious and admirably thorough—book on a single character in a Shakespearean comedy. It is not merely a spacious and widely informative volume, but an exemplary one, too. Not, I think, that there are many characters, even in Shakespeare, who can support the weight of such sustained critical analysis, so much social and stage history, such searching moral commentary. Shylock, though he is but one character of eighteen, who appears in but five scenes of twenty, is the dynamic of the entire action; and deepening discussion of the various relations in which he takes part confirms that he is an amazingly rich composite of strains. The reader of Mr. Gross's study will get, perhaps, more Shylocks for his investment of time than he can really use in the course of an evening at the theater. But he will have little trouble setting aside the more far-fetched, more bigoted, more sentimental, and more self-seeking versions of the character to arrive at a conception that satisfies his vision of the play and the play's world.

Gross starts, as Shakespeare must have, with a couple of shadowy pre-texts, amorphous fragments of fable floating around Europe, the two stories of the bond (that is, the pound of flesh) and of selecting a bride through a

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choice of caskets. One goes back to an Italian short story in a group of fifty titled *Il Pecorone*; the other, via many different versions, to a telling in the medieval *Gesta Romanorum*. The stories have no inherent connection with one another, and Shakespeare made none. The big influence on *The Merchant of Venice* was clearly from Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. Originally produced in 1592, it was revived in 1594 as part of the anti-Semitic furor occasioned by the trial and judicial murder of Rodrigo Lopez, the queen's Jewish physician. He was accused of trying to poison Elizabeth, and he suffered the hideous penalty reserved for traitors. There is no reason to doubt that Shakespeare took advantage of the momentary surge of anti-Semitic feeling to produce an anti-Semitic play of his own. In the rest of the canon there is nothing to suggest settled antipathy to Jews. In the play itself there is no other character who for vividness of feeling and force of speech comes even close to Shylock. In point of fact, Antonio is the merchant of Venice; but it is not just careless readers who think that Shylock is referred to in the title; as early as 1598 the play was referred to as "The Merchant of Venice or Otherwise Called The Jew of Venice."

On the boards it was a reasonable if not a spectacular success. We do not know who first assumed the role of Shylock, but the 1600 edition adds the descriptive comment, "with the extreme cruelty of Shylock the Jew toward the said merchant," so from this (if no more) it seems clear that Shylock was from the first a heavy character. Probably he was represented as a ludicrous but also a sinister figure. The red wig he wore identified him with Judas; the text itself calls attention to his kinship with Barabbas. The knife he conspicuously carried, with which to take his slice of Antonio, played on myths and fables of ritual murders and ceremonial eating of Christian victims. Though often labeled a comedy and included among the comedies of the First Folio, it could be a very scary play and was doubtless performed as such.

In 1605 it was twice produced by royal command at Whitehall, and then it disappeared from public notice until after the Civil Wars and the Restoration. The version put on in 1701 under the title *The Jew of Venice* made Shylock a purely grotesque figure, yet held the boards for forty years until Charles Macklin produced a version laying considerable emphasis on historical authenticity and proposing an even more terrifying Shylock, who scared the lights out of George II. In 1814 Edmund Kean, aged just twenty-three, made his London debut in the role. His was an electrifying, almost spasmodic Shylock, notable for his abandoning the red wig and so the traditional identification with Judas. Other nineteenth-century versions were those of W. H. Macready who somewhat softened the role, and Junius Brutus Booth who correspondingly hardened it.

Yet outside these features of the traditional performance, there was growing up the potential for a more understanding view of Shylock as a wounded and humiliated human being, the outraged exponent of a great tradition. Partly this change was the work of the influential, and strongly liberal, critic William Hazlitt; partly also it resulted from the gradual advance of Jews in the social and artistic life in Europe. It was the age when ghettos were finally being torn down or abandoned—not only in cities, but in the minds of men. Jews were at long last being considered for membership in the House of Commons, a Jew was the accepted head of the Conservative party in England—how could one continue to look on Jews through the medieval preconceptions that branded them as cringing outcasts and enemies of God?

The first half-sympathetic rendition of Shylock was that of Henry Irving (1879), and the predominant feature of its modernity was that Shylock was treated as a victim rather than a villain. There were ample grounds for the new view in the text, notably in the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech and in the hateful details of the court's final penalties—no sensitive audience could look happily on the forced conversion of Shylock to formal Christianity or think well of the blessings bestowed on his larcenous, heartless daughter. With the rise in Shylock's moral status came a corresponding lowering of the estimate accorded to Antonio, Bassanio, and their "gentlemanly" crew. Even Portia, once the play's angel of mercy, took on a mean and tricky aspect. At one point in the play's history, Antonio had been a figure evocative of Christ, into whose suffering side the malignant Jew was prepared to slice ruth-



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lessly; not long after, it was possible to see Shylock himself as the Christ figure, alone and persecuted, deprived of everything that had given his life meaning.

From here on, Mr. Gross's story, as it becomes more gaudy (and, frequently, funny) gets to deal more and more with extrapolations from Shakespeare's play or demonstrations of gimmicks somehow suggested by it. There is absolutely nothing on which a modern theatergoer can count when he visits the playhouse. Shylock may be a grubby, small-time usurer, a Wall Street broker, a homosexual with a letch for Antonio, an Old Testament prophet, or whatever else the director's talent for transformation allows. In addition to the various tonalities and overtones made possible by stagecraft, there is a further range of Shylocks created by criticism and commentary. John Gross, who is the acme of patient meticulosity, lists a great many of them, not overlooking the various psychoanalytic and Marxist Shylocks, plus a full table d'hôte of foreign-language versions, plus an impressive number of adaptations, continuations, avowed burlesques, and open parodies of the Shakespearean original.

This is not uninteresting material, and it emphasizes the way the character has moved into the folklore, the very language of the everyday world. But it is not very useful luggage to bring to an evening in the theater. At best, the theater audience can see and hear only a single Shylock, selected out of hundreds whom the director has at his disposal. The first lines spoken by Shylock in the entire play are utterly simple: "Three thousand ducats: well." Yet those who report on the performance of Charles Macklin say that he put into those four slow, deliberate words the full weight of the character as he interpreted it. Again, when Shylock hears from Tubal that he has been unable to locate Jessica (III,1), with what expression does an actor speak those terrible words?

I would that my daughter were dead at my feet and the jewels in her ear!
Would she were hearsed at my foot and the ducats in her coffin!

Perhaps he hears the words he has just spoken and is horrified at them, perhaps not; different actors have played the scene in different ways. At the theater one takes what one is given; the reader of Mr. Gross's book has a choice. It's not an unalloyed blessing.

For Jewish actors and audiences Shylock has had a special mixture of fascination and repugnance; some have declined the role, others sought it out. There have been productions in Israel; other productions have been canceled at the request of Jewish groups. Jacob Adler played the part on Broadway, speaking his lines in Yiddish while the rest of the cast spoke English. There have been interpretations (and, it may be, productions) that take Shakespeare's play as a pure allegory about mercy and justice—the sort of thing Milton might have written. There have been hard-line anti-Semitic productions effectively out of *Der Sturmer.* There have been gentlemanly Shylocks as by George Arliss, and a neat reaction to Shylock's plight is recorded as from a Somali tribesman. (He thought the rule against shedding blood could easily be circumvented by using a red-hot knife, and the exact measurement of a pound of flesh could be achieved by taking only a little bit at a time.) The reactions make up a pleasant plethora of incongruities. Thus it's good to have a sense that we not only judge the play differently but really experience different plays, according to our different prepossessions.

Among other considerations, it is good to be aware of Shylock as the caricature Jew created by a Gentile world to live within every real Jew as a constant threat, an imminent ugly potential. The play invokes a world of fantasy that threatens to engulf us all, Jew and Gentile alike. Someone very sensibly remarked that if Shylock and Antonio had approached a legal official of sixteenth-century Venice to authenticate their original bond, he would have bundled them both off to the madhouse. For each was living in the reflected image of the other's imagined persona.

Fortunately, John Gross does not involve us in such spiderwebs. His prose is smooth and conversational; it is thoroughly informed and free from ostentation, a constant pleasure to read. In short, it is a civilized book of criticism, such as used to be an ideal and is now, unfortunately, a rarity. One puts it down with a profound sense of gratitude.



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# *The Reader Replies*

## Henry A. Murray

I am writing to register my dismay at Paul Roazen's review in the Spring 1993 AMERICAN SCHOLAR of *Love's Story Told*, my biography of Henry A. Murray.

The principal challenge I faced in telling Murray's story—as I declare in the preface—was to produce "an integrated biography of the public and the private man—of the scientist, the litterateur, and the romantic. What," I ask, "was the interplay between the 'parts' of this complex, fascinating human being?" Had Roazen taken my prefatory remarks into account, I believe he would have found the biography pretty evenly balanced in its treatment of the diverse dimensions of its subject's life, and everywhere attentive to the connections between them. Indeed, it was to this successfully integrated fabric that my earliest reviewers drew attention. *Love's Story Told*, wrote Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer David Herbert Donald, is "an astute appraisal of the public career of one of America's leading psychologists with a sensitive interpretation of his most private inner life." "Robinson's narrative," observed Justin Kaplan, another Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer, "fuses the public and the intimate, the scientific and the Dionysian."

Roazen makes no reference to my stated objectives; nor does he offer alternative standards in their place. This much is certain, however—he is very uncomfortable with the fact that Murray was for nearly fifty years involved in a passionate extramarital relationship with Christiana Morgan. "There is something unseemly," Roazen complains, "about making so much" of this "tie." Assuming as he does that "the most intimate parts of lives" are beyond comprehension, it follows for Roazen that biographers and their subjects will do best to deliver all such revealing evidence to the flames. (This from one professing an interest in psychology!)

Murray was much less squeamish than Roazen about "the most intimate parts of lives." Following Herman Melville, he was a deep diver into the mysteries of human nature; following William James, he believed that our most authentic selves are to be found in "the recesses of feeling," and in "the darker, blinder strata of character." It was entirely consistent in Murray, therefore, that when I first proposed the biography to him, he replied, "There is nothing of interest in my life except for a love affair that lasted for nearly fifty years."

"The dyad"—as he and Christiana referred to their relationship—was at the center of the story Murray opened to me in nearly one hundred interviews spread out over eighteen years. Was its disclosure "unseemly"? Certainly not in his judgment. He had numberless opportunities to destroy all of the diaries and letters and manuscripts and artifacts bearing on the tumultuous affair. But I think it never occurred to him to destroy what had been so precious, if also so very costly, in his life. He preserved the record of the dyad precisely because he viewed it as the all-informing center to his life, and to his life's achievement. As I make clear in the preface (did Roazen read the preface?), Murray wanted "love's story told"; that wish figured decisively in his consent to my proposal that we work together on his biography.

Still, Roazen wants less—very much less—of love, and much more about the lives of Murray's friends and colleagues—Talcott Parsons, for example, and Clyde Kluckhohn. I assumed that members of the audience for this particular book would recognize these familiar figures. Roazen does. So, apparently, have most others.

And, fretful as he is about the dyad, it makes a certain sense that Roazen should want much more about Murray's old age. Indeed, my reviewer's unhappiness on this score is geared to his suspicion that I wrote the "book in the early



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1970s and then put it aside pending [Murray's] death." In fact, my research trips to Cambridge, always involving interviews with Murray, continued on a regular basis until the end of his life. As the result, I recognized, as Murray certainly did, that these final decades added little of major significance to the story we had to tell. As to the composition of *Love's Story Told*, I wrote the entire book during a fifteen-month stretch beginning in April 1990. None of it, not a word, was written before that time. But, again, all of this is clearly spelled out in the preface. Or did Roazen suppose that I was lying and that I had secretly written the book twenty years ago, then just as secretly deposited it in a drawer somewhere, and, finally, years later, dragged it all out for publication after Murray's death? He seems to have supposed just that. What a perfectly ridiculous idea!

Where, then, does all of this land us? Roazen is not really interested in the integrated narrative that I set out to write in *Love's Story Told*. Nor can he stomach the "unseemly" history that Murray revealed to me in the course of our work together. My reviewer would have been happiest with a lot less on Murray's vital, passional life, and a lot more on his famous friends and his old age. In the aggregate, these fussy and rather inchoate objections bring us to the nub of the matter—namely, for reasons perhaps best known to himself, the book Roazen wanted was in fact no book at all.

FORREST G. ROBINSON
Professor of Literature and
American Studies
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**PAUL ROAZEN replies:** I regret how thin-skinned Forrest G. Robinson has been about my review of his biography of Henry ("Harry") A. Murray.

Five blurbs, all written by distinguished people, appear on the jacket copy of *Love's Story Told*. Robinson now chooses to quote from two of these pre-publication comments. I will leave it to others to determine if this praise deserves to qualify as among the book's "earliest reviewers," and whether there is something unnecessary (or unseemly) about such self-promotion now. I had indicated in my review that "perhaps those who knew Harry better than I" will find this biography "more successful."

Robinson's preface tells us that when he "first broached the topic of the biography with Murray in the spring of 1970, he allowed—with a gentle irony of his own—that there was little to tell. Nothing much to it, he said, except for a secret love affair of more than forty years. We never looked back." I think this was a mistake, although I detect a subtle difference in Robinson's new quotation from Murray. Robinson's own account of the love affair between Harry and Christiana Morgan makes him sound selfish and destructive, and I did "not think that this book has done for Harry what he deserves." To repeat the gist of my complaint, *Love's Story Told* underplays Harry's most creative sides, and especially the ideas he and his co-workers developed.

No words in Robinson's preface concern the dates of his composition of the book. The reader is told that Robinson completed "nearly a hundred interviews, more than half of them in the early 1970s." After I looked at the notes to *Love's Story Told*, it did seem to me "as if a great deal of the primary research was done in the early 1970s." Since the almost twenty years of Harry's second marriage got so little attention in *Love's Story Told*, I mistakenly thought the book read "as if Robinson had written his book in the early 1970s and then put it aside pending Harry's death."

Such a hypothesis seemed to me a generous way of making sense of a striking incongruity in the text itself. We are told on page 294 that Murray's colleague Clyde Kluckhohn had "his own carefully guarded secret life." The only explanation to that mystery can be found in a citation at the back of the book attached to the earlier page 230: "Kluckhohn's homosexuality was no secret to many in the Harvard community." The evidence for this proposition about Kluckhohn, at odds with the other mention of his "secret life," came from a 1985 interview, which made me wonder when the main text got constructed. It seemed to me that Robinson's thinking, if not his writing, was chronologically peculiar. But the news that he started composing the book in 1990 does not absolve him from the responsibility for failing to avoid a contradiction, nor for having neglected to tell why Kluckhohn's anthropological work mattered.

In my review I suspected that Harry himself might find me too puritanical, or "fussy," as Robinson now says. If *Love's Story Told* is to be the beginning of a literature on Murray and the circles he moved in, well and good. But I fear that a future generation will be so titillated by the details about sadomasochism between Harry and Morgan as to downplay, as in my opinion *Love's Story Told* unfortunately does, why Harry's accomplishments, as well as his tragic frustrations, matter to the life of the mind.

*Love's Story Told* has many remarkable merits, which perhaps I insufficiently alluded to in my review. I hope my comments now are not more one-dimensional as I try to cope with the author's defensiveness.



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## The Bill of Rights in Its Context

Oscar Handlin and Edward Shils, in their excellent articles in the Spring 1993 AMERICAN SCHOLAR, voice a common, somewhat wistful complaint that there seem to be no objective standards for the concept of law in the field of jurisprudence, or of truth in the field of teaching, "truths discovered by study and reflection." Laws are now made by judges (Handlin, p. 186) and "the value of academic freedom is denied since the truth which it is designed to protect is declared to be an illusion" (Shils, p. 209).

To a theologian, this is the price we pay for abandoning the concept of Creation, which lies at the heart of all the world's great religions and is eloquently stated for Judaism in Genesis 1 and for Christianity in that chapter and in John 1: 1–14. In these passages Divine thought precedes and governs the universe which is subsequently brought into being. Human beings are able to "feel after (God) and find him" (Acts 17:27). The Deist version of this concept enabled the writers of the Declaration of Independence to claim that "all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." This is a theological, not a scientific statement. If the theology is denied or ignored, the rights are no longer self-evident.

The responsibility for defining objective standards for Law and Truth in a secular academia now rests with those who advocate emancipation from religion as a frame of reference for the pursuit of this goal. Can they do it?

REVEREND DONALD RUDOLPH CAUGHEY
Rancho Santa Fe, California

**OSCAR HANDLIN replies:** The complaint of Donald Caughey is familiar: in the absence of belief in a Creator there can be no sanction for moral law. The issue has provided ample material for the controversies of philosophers of ethics. But the application to statutory law does not depend on a theistic foundation. For centuries Americans have divided upon religious issues but have been able to legislate upon numerous matters without appeals to divine authority; and whatever respect adhered to ministers of religion they were rarely called on to help in enacting or enforcing laws. The ultimate authority was consent of the governed in the rather simple belief that the freely expressed views of the majority of the people would most closely approximate the moral sense of the community. The danger in judge-made law springs from its distance from consent of the governed, a gap that provides fertile soil for controversy.

## Herbert Hoover Meets Adolf Hitler

In his otherwise excellent article in the Spring 1993 issue, John Lukacs writes two statements which do not appear to conform to facts.

On pages 236 and 237, Lukacs spoke of "many Americans who were inclined favorably to the new Germany, in spite (or, in some ways, because) of the barrage of news propagated about the brutalities of the Hitler regime, thinking (*and in some instances that was so*) that that kind of propaganda was greatly exaggerated, the product of special interests" (my emphasis).

This statement is astounding, coming as it does after more and more details are documented concerning the early days of the Nazi regime, let alone the horrible revelations of Nazi deeds during the war.

On the same page, 237, Mr. Lukacs writes: "His [Hitler's] insistence on the threat of Communism *was a main reason* why Hindenburg and the German conservatives allowed him to come to power in 1933" (my emphasis).

Most reputable historians have shown that Hindenburg was manipulated by his son who was deep in financial debt. For, since the Nazis had lost more than two million votes in six months, there would not have been a politically justifiable reason to call on Hitler then. Von Papen led the conservatives in their "palace coup," succeeding where ballots had failed.

KONRAD BIEBER
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I have great admiration for the work of John Lukacs. Indeed, throughout his distinguished career he has been a stalwart critic of all forms of totalitarianism. This makes his brief "History" piece "Herbert Hoover Meets Adolf Hitler" somewhat puzzling. Just what was the purpose of this exercise? Was it to prove that political pilgrims are hardly confined to leftist post-war causes but are also extended to the defense of rightist pre-war states as well? Or was it to prove that Churchill exhibited far greater wisdom than former President Herbert Hoover in assessing the war dangers posed by Nazism? In either case, the essay succeeds admirably, perhaps beyond Mr. Lukacs's wildest dreams.

To find that Herbert Hoover, on the event of the Anschluss, the decimation of a free and independent Austria, could go to Germany and be "impressed with what he saw, the splendid new highways, the new housing, and the general prosperity in the German towns and villages," a



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theme repeatedly struck in this astonishing piece of apologetics, and conclude that "the world must look with admiration at the results achieved in Germany" only confirms that the soul of Mr. Hoover lay not in politics but in engineering.

But Mr. Lukacs apparently has a larger purpose in mind: to indicate a schism within the Republican Party ranks that both pre-dates and post-dates World War II. Hoover appears as the centerpiece of an "establishment" that lost the 1940 nomination to "the anti-Nazi Wendell Wilkie," indeed, "with the help of some legerdemain." John Lukacs comes perilously close to endorsing, or at least putting a gentle face on, the cause of isolationism and pro-Nazi sentiment in pre–World War II American political circles.

One is never certain whether Lukacs is hiding behind, or exposing, Hoover's opposition to Churchill's statement that if Hitler won, "then the whole world, including the United States, including all we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a New Dark Age." It is evident that Lukacs scoffs at such rhetoric, preferring to look at the bright side of the Nazis' wining and dining of Hoover, with Hermann Goering and Hjalmar Schacht bemoaning that Hoover could not complete his great mission of state, and assuring him of a revivified political career—this at the moment plans for the decimation of Europe were being, not just hatched, but carried out.

To speak of Hoover as believing "Hitler's Germany posed no real threat to the West" without a hint of criticism, and by tacitly accepting the view that Nazi Germany posed less of a danger than Communist Russia, and in so doing lining up with Joe McCarthy and Pat Buchanan, raises disturbing issues that one had hoped would by now be laid to rest. John Lukacs is much too kind to the memory of Hoover, and far too capable an intellectual historian to permit Lindbergh, Taft, and Hoover to carry the torch for the worst genocidal regime on record. This is both dubious ethics and deracinated history. The need for a far more candid narrative is obvious. Even if the events discussed took place in 1938, the evaluation is being offered in 1993.

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In "Herbert Hoover Meets Adolf Hitler," John Lukacs's account of their mutually agreeable exchange of views on March 8, 1938, Mr. Lukacs writes that Hoover "was not alone in being impressed by the Third Reich in early 1938. That was before some of the worst excesses of Nazi rule had become wide public knowledge. Before 1938 there were many Americans who were inclined favorably to the new Germany, *in spite (or, in some ways, because) of the barrage of news propagated about the brutalities of the Hitler regime, thinking (and in some instances that was so) that that kind of propaganda was greatly exaggerated, the product of special interests*" (my italics).

Would Mr. Lukacs please tell me what "was greatly exaggerated" in the reports of Nazi "excesses" (!) five years after Hitler had been given power and one year before he launched the Second World War? And just who were these "special interests" spreading their "product"? The proscribed persecuted vilified Jews? The prisoners at Dachau, Belson, and other concentration camps in Germany? The destroyed labor movement? The Socialists, Communists, pacifists, dissident priests and churchmen, the authors whose books were burned in mass ceremonies?

ALFRED KAZIN
New York, New York

**JOHN LUKACS replies:** In "Herbert Hoover Meets Adolf Hitler" I recorded and described a little-known episode, their meeting and conversation in 1938. Among other things, Hitler knew how to appeal to Hoover with the argument of anti-Communism that Hitler used to his advantage throughout his career. Contrary to Dr. Bieber's statement, it helped greatly his coming to power, and succeeded in impressing Hindenburg during their meeting in November 1932. The obsession with Communism, evident among certain American Republicans, well antedated the Cold War. It appealed to Hoover, otherwise a well-meaning man, who also said that he was impressed with many things in the Third Reich. After his return to the United States, Hoover dictated a memorandum in which he said, among other things, that he found no sign of Germany preparing for offensive war, and that he found the German conquest of Austria or, later, much of Central and Eastern Europe acceptable, indeed, potentially beneficial for many of their peoples. In understanding Hitler in 1938, Lloyd George and Chamberlain and Lindbergh and Hoover and many others were wrong, while Churchill was right. This is not an explication of my article; this is what my article contained. In 1940 Churchill said that "if Hitler wins, the world would sink into the abyss of a New Dark Age." According to Dr. Horowitz, "it is evident that Lukacs scoffs at such rhetoric." The very opposite is true.

Mr. Kazin is incited by my statement that in



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1938 there were many Americans who were favorably inclined to Germany, and that some of the news stories about the Nazi regime were exaggerated. There *was* plenty of reliable evidence about Nazi brutalities (even though in March 1938 Belsen did not yet exist, and the dreadful "Kristallnacht" came eight months later). At the same time there *were* false stories, some of which have entered history books (one of them was the legend that Hitler had refused to meet Jesse Owens at the Berlin Olympics). In my article, too, I had to include the incident of a report filed by an American newspaperman from Berlin about a "clash" between Hoover and Hitler during their meeting; but there was no clash, and the American ambassador to Germany found it necessary to insist on that in a special wire to Washington. Well, I wish there had been a clash—in which case Hitler would have realized that he could not count on the Hooverites and the Taftites to oppose American support to Britain in 1940. There was a division between Americans at the time, the existence of which cannot be denied by any serious historian. But I have written elsewhere, more than once, and I repeat, again and again: had someone like Hoover been president in 1940, Hitler would have won the war. That does not seem to be enough for Mr. Kazin.

## A Very Private Person

To adapt a phrase from Wordsworth, Aristides (THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, Summer 1993), offered a notion recollected in tranquillity when he wrote: "what was entailed in this sort of activity was, to adapt a phrase from Wordsworth, a willing suspension of humanity. . . ." However, the tranquillity must have been imperfect, as the phrase is Coleridge's.

STEVEN G. KELLMAN
University of Texas
San Antonio, Texas

**ARISTIDES replies:** Professor Kellman is of course correct to point out that it was Coleridge, and not Wordsworth, who coined the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief." Since I really did know that the phrase is Coleridge's, I am doubly upset by this obvious error. Clearly, I must never again recollect another quotation in tranquillity.



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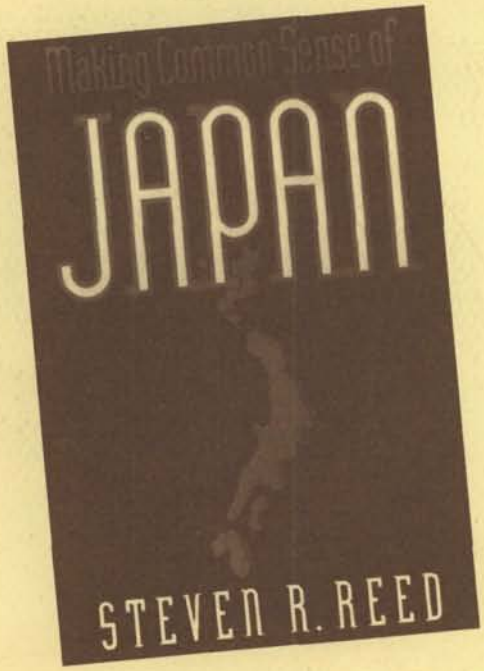


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